



Faculty Planning & Curricular Coherence

Grantee Convening

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About the Initiative

As President Judith Shapiro and Program Director Loni Bordoloi Pazich noted in their introductory remarks to the grantee convening, the mission of The Teagle Foundation is to strengthen liberal arts education and serve as a catalyst for improving teaching and learning while addressing issues of financial sustainability and accountability. The *Faculty Planning and Curricular Coherence* initiative addresses a number of challenging issues, including the need for faculty to be fully aware of the barriers that students may encounter in moving through the curriculum; the tendency to add to the curriculum rather than to streamline it; and the requirement that faculty work together if they are to create a truly coherent and high quality curriculum.

In fall 2013, The Teagle Foundation issued a request for proposal (RFP) for the initiative, inviting selected institutions and organizations to apply for grants that addressed the following question: **“How can faculty work together to create a more coherent and intentional curriculum whose goals, pathways, and outcomes are clear to students and other constituencies with a stake in the future of higher education?”** The grant initiative sought to **“support campus initiatives that delve deep into the structure of the curriculum and make transparent to students what they can expect to learn and how the curriculum’s architecture delivers this learning.”**

The RFP also asked that institutions craft an ambitious approach to curricular change, demonstrating clearer learning outcomes for general education and the major; more interrelationships among courses in a program or major; and that they demonstrate “an effort to curb course proliferation and engage in substantive curricular streamlining as part of designing a more intentional and cohesive educational experience.” Other features that were specified in the RFP were: a faculty-owned and led initiative; the creation of a faculty learning community across multiple disciplines and institutions; attention to inter-institutional learning; rigorous assessment of the effects of the curricular redesign on student learning and faculty practices; and a dissemination effort that will share the lessons learned by the grantee institution.

The Conversation and its Participants

The Foundation regularly convenes grantees to provide them with an opportunity to learn from each other and for the Foundation to learn from their experiences. Program Officer Desiree Vazquez Barlatt presented a profile of the grantees represented at this meeting. Participants were drawn from ten projects, representing 50 institutions. Of these, 53% were community colleges, 37% liberal arts colleges, and 10% masters/doctoral institutions. She identified two groupings of projects—one group that focused on implementing identified pathways through the curriculum and a second that sought to streamline the curriculum to promote integrative learning, incorporate high impact practices, and ease curricular bottlenecks.

Several projects were mid-way through their work; some were just beginning. The projects represented at the meeting were as follows (listed in order by grant period):

- San Francisco State University. [Faculty-Led Curriculum Design at SFSU](#)
- Claremont McKenna, Harvey Mudd, Scripps, Pitzer and Pomona Colleges. [Consortial Collaboration to Optimize Curricular Coherence and Resource Allocation](#)
- Davis & Elkins College, Eckerd College, Virginia Wesleyan College, and Shenandoah University. [The C4 Consortium for a More Compelling and Coherent Liberal Arts Curriculum](#)
- University of Texas System. [Integration of Liberal Arts into Pre-Professional Education](#)
- Allegheny College, Denison University, Kenyon College, Oberlin College, Ohio Wesleyan University, and the College of Wooster. [Faculty Planning and Curricular Coherence: A Framework for Strengthening Integrated Learning](#)
- Borough of Manhattan, Stella and Charles Guttman, and Hostos Community Colleges. [Project for Relevant and Improved Mathematics Education](#)
- USC Center for Urban Education, Aims Community College, Community College of Denver, and Front Range Community College. [An Instructional and Assessment Model for Equity-Minded Curricular Redesign](#)
- Foundation for California Community College. [California Guided Pathways Project](#)
- Willamette and Pacific Universities and the College of Idaho. [Promoting Faculty-Led Curricular Reform](#)
- Project Pericles, Macalester and Morehouse Colleges, Widener University. [Creating Curricular Coherence through Inquiry-Based Curricula and Thematic Pathways](#)

Inhibitors and Contributors of Curricular Coherence

After presenting an overview of the highly interactive meeting that would unfold over the next day, Loni reviewed the purpose and format of the first session. Seated at round tables, the participants were asked to discuss a list of factors that could have an effect on curricular coherence, considering whether on their campuses they were *contributors*, *inhibitors*, or *could be either*, and why. At the conclusion of the discussion, each table would place a “chit” labeled with each of the factors on one of three flipcharts to provide a visual picture of the conclusions reached in the small group discussions. The factors were as follows: *academic specialization; changes in the disciplines, electives, special interests of administrators, advising, special interests of the faculty, duplication of courses across departments, and student demand*.

Given the propensity of academics to see the complexity of issues, the fact that all eight factors were listed as potentially *going either way* was not surprising

The list of factors promoting curricular coherence was the shortest, with academic advising topping the list with three chits. Receiving one vote each were *changes in the disciplines, student demand*, and a rewritten *interests of special administrators* (in lieu of *special interests of administrators*.) One group wrote a new chit, adding *capstone courses* to the list of factors promoting curricular coherence.

The list of inhibitors was about the same length as the list of contributors, with *academic specialization, duplication of courses across departments, and special interests of faculty* each cited by three groups. One group thought that administrators played an inhibiting role, citing *special interests of administrators*; two wrote in additional factors—*proliferation of courses* and *ideology*.

The ensuing plenary discussion elaborated on why many saw the factors as *going either way*. The topic of advising generated a lively discussion. It serves as an inhibitor when faculty advisors are unfamiliar with curriculum outside their departments, or simply don’t understand the rationale for the overall curriculum. As one participant put it, “If the faculty don’t understand the curriculum, how can students?” Another participant observed that the need for vigorous advising can be a symptom of a curriculum that is opaque to students. Some faculty want to direct students rather narrowly to a particular discipline or profession. On the other hand, advisors can help students see connections among courses, take a step back to reflect on their learning, and devise pathways through the curriculum.



Student demand is another double-edged sword. It can lead to fragmentation of the curriculum, as was the case in one institution where the tracks in environmental studies proliferated in response to student interests. At the same time, students also want to understand the value of their courses (especially requirements) and how they fit together. In this way, student demand can advance the coherence agenda.

Another example of a factor that cuts both ways was the *special interests of faculty members*, which lead faculty to pursue personal interests rather than collective goals. It is also possible that a special interest of a faculty member can work in favor of curricular coherence—for example when the interest is to encourage the interdisciplinary work that serves as an antidote to intellectual silos.

The role of administrators generated different opinions. One participant noted that developmental courses in community colleges provide a way for institutions to generate revenue. The instruction is cheap and students may cycle through these courses several times. But administrators can also have a positive effect. At one institution, they were the driving force in shrinking the sequence of developmental

math courses to two courses with students taking them simultaneously with college level courses, resulting in greater coherence to the math curriculum. Lynn Pasquerella, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) cited the example of Mount Holyoke College's development of a program in data science. The special interest of administrators had a positive impact by meeting demand from faculty and students, obtaining funding, and facilitating the recognition of interdisciplinary work for promotion and tenure.

Steven Mintz of the University of Texas summarized the challenge of this work on campus with his comment. He noted that curricular coherence is an intentionally designed, developmental education experience. Because most faculty members have highly specialized disciplinary experience, it is very challenging for them to think across disciplines as well as developmentally. How, then, he queried, "can we create cultures that promote that kind of thinking when faculty have spent years in graduate school learning that this is not important?"

Deepening the Conversation

The evening session—a panel discussion of Robert Zemsky, Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania and Ann Ferren, Distinguished Fellow at AAC&U, moderated by Teagle President Judith Shapiro—probed some fundamental issues of definition of and strategies for curricular coherence.

Bob and Ann often saw things differently, which made for a lively discussion and provided much food for thought. On the question of definition of curricular coherence, Ann emphasized that the perfect curriculum is elusive, and perhaps the more important work for faculty is to help students make meaning of their studies. Bob emphasized the role of faculty members as "designers of the learning experience," and the importance of the interdependence of the curricular parts—so that "what I teach and what my colleagues teach are interconnected." He illustrated the latter point with the case of the executive doctorate at Penn. The students, who move through the program as a cohort, discovered early in the life of the program that the faculty "had no idea what each other were doing." And that began the faculty quest to collectively redesign the curriculum so that the units connect to each other and the students take them in a developmental sequence.

Ann and Bob did agree with each other and with Judith when she pointed out that curricular coherence can look different at different types of institutions. Size certainly, matters, said Ann. When you have a small campus and can get all the faculty in a room at the same time, that is a tremendous advantage. At large institutions, the important conversations take place in departments, which gets in the way of interdisciplinary conversations. Bob agreed that the setting is key. Money

matters. He lamented that community colleges are the most under-resourced institutions. As Reisman and Jenkins¹ recommended in 1968, providing more resources to these institutions could produce real change. The richer institutions, Bob observed, have no incentive to change.

Whatever the setting, curricular change is often seen as a threat, noted Judith. In what ways, she asked, have you been able to address faculty resistance? Ann noted the tremendous change that has occurred in higher education—we have changed pedagogy, the definition of the curriculum, with new emphasis on different kinds of learning opportunities such as experience in the community, study abroad, experiential learning. Ann advised finding the people who are doing good things on campus and connecting them. We don't find enough ways to celebrate, she said, or tap into the energy of the innovators. But, she cautioned, getting things started and sustaining change are different. The latter needs supporting structures and finding ways not to burn people out.

Bob responded by describing what he and his team learned from his Teagle project, in which they collected stories from 182 faculty on 11 campuses. He agreed with Ann the academy has changed in profound ways, so much that it is not recognizable. But what has changed is pedagogy, not curriculum. This is so because faculty continue to work independently—[in] “my room,” [with] “my students.” But “let me get on with my work” will not work for curricular change. If you challenge faculty independence, you must say “our room, not my room; our students, not my students,” and thus “you are fundamentally challenging the way faculty think.”

But, then, queried Judith, how do you change faculty willingness to work in concert, to see themselves in a different way, to move beyond “I do it my way”? Once again, Bob and Ann suggested different paths. Ann suggested that cultural change is more important than structural change. Change is a deep cultural and emotional process—as well as messy— and a change leader needs to find entry points that give people ways to connect and articulate their concerns. Keeping the naysayers in the room can help them learn from colleagues. And deep change requires a lot of patience, she added. It is hard to acknowledge genuine intellectual differences and some campuses have spent a year on a study group on a particular issue. For Bob, changing the curriculum requires changing the rules. The rules that have emerged over the last fifty years have assured the faculty's independence, impeding such collective actions as interdisciplinary cooperation, team teaching, and genuine collaboration on curricular design.

¹Jencks, C. & Riesman, D. (1968). *The Academic Revolution*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Managing Change

On the second day of the meeting, a panel session returned to the theme of change that permeated the conversations of the prior day. The panelists represented very different institutions and projects. The session began with a thumbnail sketch of each panelist's Teagle work. Rebecca Walker, Professor of Mathematics at Stella and Charles Guttman Community College (NY) described the efforts at three community colleges to streamline and improve the developmental math curriculum. Steven Mintz, Executive Director of the University of Texas System Institute for Transformational Learning, described the UT effort to create holistic and highly structured curricular pathways that have dramatically increased the success rate for underserved students. Trevor Getz, Professor and Chair of History at San Francisco State University (SFSU), underscored the importance of creating a learning community in the SFSU project of redesigning majors. And Debra Mashek, Associate Professor of Psychology at Harvey Mudd College, described their effort to improve academic cooperation among five institutions in the Claremont Colleges Consortium.

Faculty, observed Loni, have so many demands on their time. What is it about the structure of your project, she queried, that facilitates faculty engagement? For Trevor, the key is creating an inclusive environment to encourage as many faculty as possible to participate. Less experienced or less interested faculty can learn from their more experienced colleagues in the learning community that was created for the Teagle work. Engaging faculty in new ways of thinking is easier at a new institution, posited Rebecca. That Guttman is so new and has no departments presents a unique opportunity for faculty to think and teach differently. Steve emphasized the importance of focusing on changing systems rather than engaging individual faculty or creating "boutique projects." He warned against investing in individual innovators, who may move on or lose interests. Similarly, small projects may not scale up.

Collaboration is another key to success in creating sustainable change. Deb described a [continuum of collaboration](#) that served as a conceptual framework for the Claremont College's efforts to facilitate academic cooperation among five campuses. At one extreme there is no relationship; next there is networking and information sharing. A higher level of collaboration is altering practices to take into account the other institution's needs and interests. The highest level posits individual change to make collaboration work. Deb also underscored the importance of collaboration across functions—reaching out to people who know how the institution works and who can help solve problems. The registrars, she reported, were able to find fixes for problems that the faculty thought impossible to solve. A vibrant learning community, such as the one created at SFSU, added Trevor, promotes trust and unleashes faculty members' good ideas and creativity.

Scalability and sustainability of the project initiatives are important success factors for The Teagle Foundation, noted Loni. For Steve, cultural change is the key to scalability. First, people must recognize that there is a problem; otherwise, why change? Sustainability, noted Rebecca, is about maintaining a culture; for Guttman, hiring new faculty who buy in to their approaches and culture is key. Structures also matter. To sustain the work of coordinating academic cooperation begun in the Teagle project, the Claremont Consortium presidents agreed to continue funding a position to accomplish this work. Although this represents an institutional investment, it will ultimately save resources for individual campuses to invest in their own priorities and special programs. Yet another strategy is to align the Teagle work with ongoing activities. SFSU will align curriculum revision with the regular program review process, having departments review parts of their curriculum each year so it becomes part of the ongoing strategy and integrated with other efforts to promote student achievement.

Heading Home

To conclude the meeting, participants reflected on discussions from the previous day in which they shared in small groups their successes and challenges and received advice from their peers in their groups. Several participants reflected on principles that the meeting underscored and that were important to guide their project work, such as keeping student learning at the center; continuing to widen the circle of participation; and continuing to learn from partner campuses. Some were looking ahead—how to build on the momentum and learning to continue the work started in their Teagle initiative. Listening to the more experienced project leaders helped the participants at the beginning of their journeys to anticipate some of the issues they may face.

Plus Ça Change

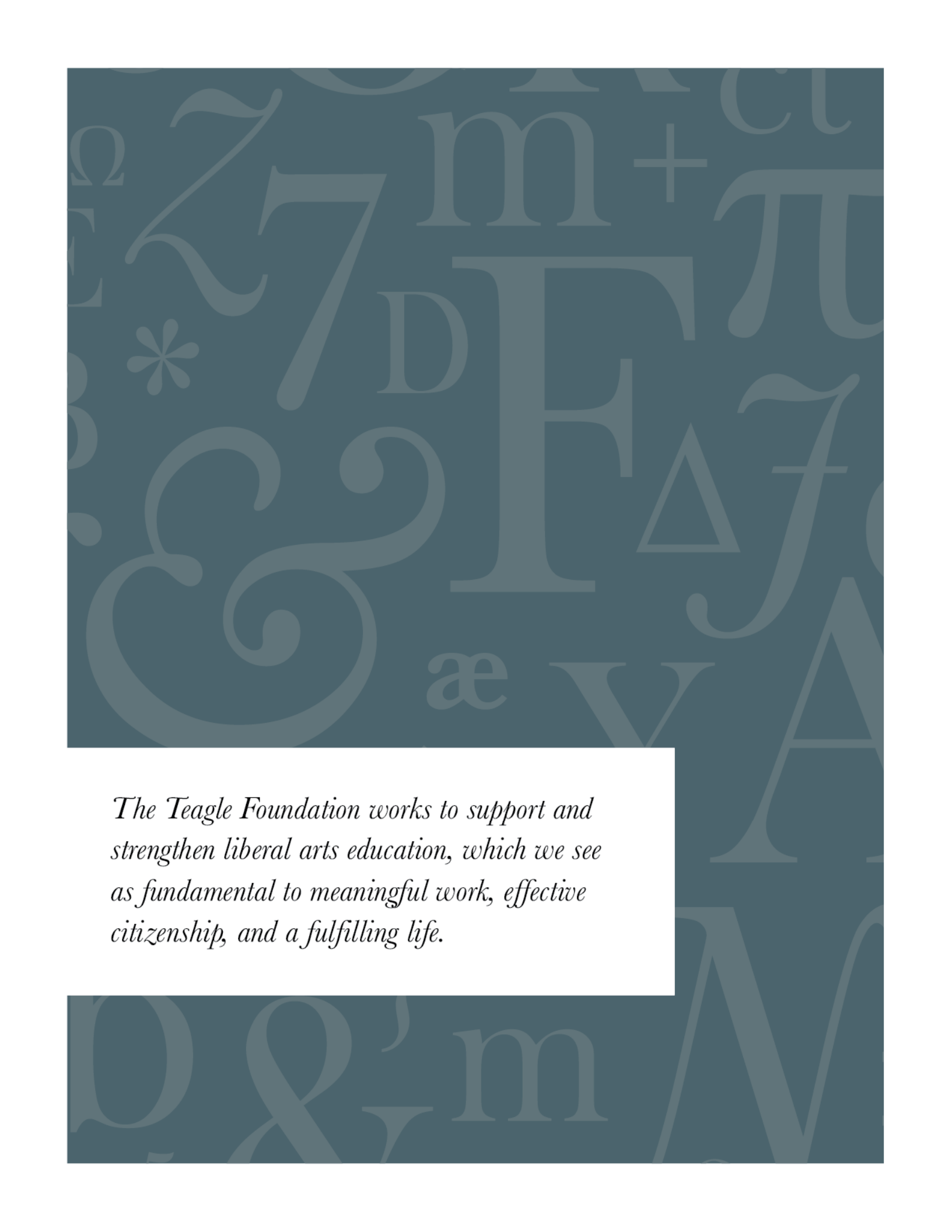
Lest we think that the topics of the convening were new to the 21st century, Judith referred to a text nearly two centuries old, *The Yale Report of 1828*. Many of the issues outlined in the second part of the report on liberal education and the classical curriculum are still with us today. The text differentiates liberal and professional education, and discusses the various areas of study (and the debates surrounding them) that comprise a liberal education. Different paths of learning, the continuing evolution of the curriculum, and the pursuit of credentials are hardly new topics. The passage that Judith read refers to the debates about studying classical vs. modern languages:

It is...a matter of some curiosity to know what is intended by the final union of students who take these different paths. That they would find, at the end of their course, that they had all acquired the same education, is certainly not the meaning...They only union manifest is this—that they would all be admitted to a degree. They would unite in receiving their diplomas. If to obtain the honors of the college, as they are called, this improvement on the old collegiate course might be considered as real. But if the substance and not the shadow, if the thing signified and not the sign only are aimed at—the question is still open for consideration whether these different roads would not lead those who travel them to entirely different regions...Manifest, however, as is the fallacy of substituting a diploma for an education²

The principles that undergirded liberal arts education are alive and well; we continue our quest to provide students with an education that is, as the Yale report put it “broad, deep, and solid,” – and, we would add, coherent.³

² The Yale Report of 1828, Part II, p. 7. <http://collegiateway.org/reading/yale-report-1828/>

³ Part I, p.3.

The background of the entire page is a dark blue-grey color with a repeating pattern of various letters and symbols in a light grey, serif font. The symbols include the Greek letter Omega (Ω), the number 7, the letter m, a plus sign (+), the Greek letter Pi (π), the letter D, the letter F, the Greek letter Delta (Δ), the letter J, the letter A, the letter V, the letter W, the letter N, the letter M, the letter R, the letter S, the letter T, the letter U, the letter X, the letter Y, the letter Z, the letter A, the letter B, the letter C, the letter D, the letter E, the letter F, the letter G, the letter H, the letter I, the letter J, the letter K, the letter L, the letter M, the letter N, the letter O, the letter P, the letter Q, the letter R, the letter S, the letter T, the letter U, the letter V, the letter W, the letter X, the letter Y, the letter Z, the Greek letter Alpha (α), the Greek letter Beta (β), the Greek letter Gamma (γ), the Greek letter Delta (δ), the Greek letter Epsilon (ε), the Greek letter Zeta (ζ), the Greek letter Eta (η), the Greek letter Theta (θ), the Greek letter Iota (ι), the Greek letter Kappa (κ), the Greek letter Lambda (λ), the Greek letter Mu (μ), the Greek letter Nu (ν), the Greek letter Xi (ξ), the Greek letter Omicron (ο), the Greek letter Pi (π), the Greek letter Rho (ρ), the Greek letter Sigma (σ), the Greek letter Tau (τ), the Greek letter Upsilon (υ), the Greek letter Phi (φ), the Greek letter Chi (χ), the Greek letter Psi (ψ), the Greek letter Omega (ω), the letter Æ, the letter Œ, the letter &, the letter %.

The Teagle Foundation works to support and strengthen liberal arts education, which we see as fundamental to meaningful work, effective citizenship, and a fulfilling life.