

Data into Action: Using Assessment Data with Faculty to Improve Student Learning

“Collecting data is hard. Translating that data into action is really, really hard.”
—Charlie Blaich, Director of Inquiries, Wabash National Study

1 Project Overview

Liberal Arts Institutions collect a great deal of data about students and student learning—and most of it goes unused, particularly by faculty. By failing to connect information about students and the expertise already present on their campuses, colleges create a data bottleneck rather than a nexus that enhances the shared enterprise of student engagement and learning. Even when faculty members receive data on student learning, they are often unclear about how to respond, in part because such data is so varied and broad. However, faculty must be fully engaged in using assessment data if we are to realize substantive, ongoing change in curricular design and teaching practices that lead to gains in student learning.

Moving “data into action” requires multiple steps and cannot be accomplished through administrative mandates, especially on small college campuses where faculty governance is the norm. Faculty members have to help shape the questions that are relevant on their campuses and in their lives as teachers; they need to collaborate with administrators to identify existing data that can help answer those questions; they need to help design the reports in which the data will be presented in order for it to be useful and meaningful; and they need to actively engage with one another to best understand what insights the data reveal about student learning and about the work they undertake in their individual classes, departments, and institutions. Fostering and then leveraging faculty ownership of assessment results is the key to unlocking the effective use of assessment data to improve student learning.

This project will facilitate faculty ownership of the assessment data about student learning that our institutions are already collecting, and help systematize the ways in which faculty use that data to make decisions about curriculum, course design, and teaching that impact student learning. Over three years, Connecticut College (lead institution), Allegheny College, Colorado College, and Franklin Pierce University will collaborate to pilot and validate institutional models that weave effective use of assessment data into the routine work of the institution. The four collaborating colleges will each be led by a project Co-Investigator and form diverse “Campus Leadership Teams” composed of the Co-Investigator, faculty, faculty development coordinators, academic administrators, and institutional research officers. Each campus team will address a distinctive institutional challenge, and will ultimately develop a model program to address that challenge. These models will demonstrate the systematic and effective use of assessment data for continuous program and course improvement designed to improve student learning.

The project is designed to be both flexible (allowing for local campus goals, values and approaches that meet campus needs) and highly collaborative, continually sharing campus practices and challenges through a series of Interim Strategic Consultations, campus visits, and Teagle “Data into Action” Institutes. These Teagle Institutes that bring together the diverse faculty and administrative teams from each lead campus, as well as a small number of additional

campuses. These meetings will provide the campuses opportunities to share, critique, and support one another in their work as the Campus Leadership Teams proceed from framing the questions to be answered, developing methods to find and report the answers using existing data, and using these data to help faculty make changes to improve student learning. A final capstone Teagle “Data into Action” Institute will bring these threads together and set the stage for broader dissemination. At the conclusion of our work, we will distribute the project results through articles in higher education publications (*Liberal Education, Peer Review, To Improve the Academy*) and meetings of organizations such as AAC&U, regional accreditation agencies, and the POD Network for faculty development. We intend to produce a monograph describing the piloted and validated faculty development models supplemented with stories by individual faculty or by departments.

2 Project Goals and Outcomes

The four core institutions' Campus Leadership Teams will collaborate to pursue four outcomes on their respective campuses and through their inter-campus conversations:

1. Partner with faculty groups to identify key questions about student learning, questions whose answers would help shape curricular design and faculty teaching practice.
2. Collaborate with faculty to identify data already collected by their colleges (e.g., NSSE, CIRP, CLA, senior surveys, Wabash National Study, course enrollment, grade information, and local data such as senior capstone assessments) that can help answer the questions faculty identify as well as to create reporting models that communicate the relevant assessment data in ways that are meaningful and useful to faculty seeking to improve student learning.
3. Create workshops or other faculty development programs that engage faculty with the key questions and the answers provided by assessment data, as well as curricular design and teaching development inspired by the answers.
4. Assess program effectiveness, develop transferable institutional models that engage faculty in evidence-based efforts to improve student learning, and disseminate these models nationally.

The emphasis on developing a faculty-driven, systematic process that uses assessment data to inform curricular design and teaching development projects distinguishes this project from other assessment projects focused mainly on gathering more information about student learning. Such assessment projects too often focus solely on collecting the data, which then used only for purposes of reporting, accreditation, benchmarking, or making structural curricular changes, but too-rarely influence faculty teaching practices. In contrast, the overall goal of our project is to model the development of institutional cultures and practices that support systematic, continuous, data-driven improvement that is embraced by faculty. Our project will meet the local assessment needs of our institutions while also providing exemplar models for other liberal arts colleges to consider and adapt. Models will include samples of key questions, assessment methods, reporting structures, and effective practices that promote the use of relevant data to

inform curricular change and classroom practice. Most importantly, these models will connect data about student learning to *faculty action* that *directly improves* student learning. We will describe and disseminate these models in ways that will encourage and ease adoption and adaptation to a variety of campus cultures at liberal arts colleges across the country.

3 Model Initiatives

The four colleges collaborating on this project are at different stages in their work and have very different specific needs, which we expect to yield a rich set of institutional models. Since all participants are working within the context of a private liberal arts college, they bring a shared understanding of mission to the table, but the diversity of institutional initiatives provides ample opportunity to challenge assumptions and suggest novel approaches as we work together.

At Connecticut College, faculty are already engaged in discussions about the implications of a preliminary finding from the Wabash National Study suggesting Connecticut College's first year students are not experiencing the level of "academic challenge" that they and the faculty expect. For this project, the Connecticut College Leadership Team will continue to dig deeper into this issue, identifying other questions to ask, seeking answers in the wealth of data already extant on campus, sharing their work with other faculty, and facilitating campus discussions about how faculty members can improve their classroom practices to promote deeper student learning. The outcomes of this project would be a shared understanding of expectations about academic challenge and its connection to student learning, a meaningful way to measure the intellectual challenge our students experience, and faculty development workshops to help faculty translate their new understanding into effective classroom practice that provides a richer, more challenging experience that is most likely to promote substantive learning.

At Allegheny College, our most recent accreditation review prompted the creation of a departmental self-study and planning process that includes assessment of student learning as a cornerstone and asks departments to use that assessment to guide planning decisions in ways that lead to improved learning. However, since the College lacks any systematic way of disseminating assessment data tied to specific learning objectives, as departments cycle through the process, they start their investigations from scratch without building on the work already done by other departments. This repetition of similar tasks compromises valuable faculty and support staff time and energy, resources which could more productively be dedicated to implementing changes to improve student learning. Through participation in the Teagle project, Allegheny expects to standardize the first phases of departmental assessment and planning, creating a shared set of student learning outcomes, a standard set of assessment questions that each department will consider, and a standard set of reports drawing on assessment data to inform their deliberations. It will also create faculty development initiatives that will help faculty interpret the reports, engage them in substantive discussions about their findings, and assist them with applying what they learn to effective course and program development leading to deeper learning.

In 1991 **Franklin Pierce University** (then College) began implementation of a completely revised, integrated general education (core) curriculum with the theme, "Individual and Community." With only minor revision along the way, this curriculum has remained in place,

but concerns among faculty and students have accumulated, including a declining sense of thematic and curricular integration and frustration with limited student course choice. As reflected in our recent NEASC self-study, the core is due for a major review. Franklin Pierce University proposes a Teagle *Data into Action* project to conduct a comprehensive review, with particular emphasis on the analysis of existing institutional data on student learning relating to the objectives of the core curriculum. Franklin Pierce's goal is not only to effectively utilize data to inform a revision of core learning goals, but to also develop a process for benchmarking newly adopted goals and actual outcomes. Ultimately, the ongoing monitoring, assessment, and updating of the goals and curriculum will happen collaboratively and regularly through faculty development opportunities.

Colorado College established a faculty-governed Assessment Committee in spring 2008. Working with that committee, the Dean of the Faculty charged academic departments to develop student learning outcomes for each major and then to consider direct ways those outcomes could be assessed as students progress and/or complete the major. The College anticipates this work will be completed as part of this Teagle initiative and will involve significant sharing *across departments* within the College and with Teagle partners. As departments complete the work of identifying and assessing student learning, areas in need of attention will be identified, and faculty development workshops will be created to assist them with engaging these findings and with planning for curricular and course improvement that leads to better student outcomes. In addition to locating where specific skills and bodies of knowledge are taught in specific courses and learning experiences, departments are designing rubrics with which to assess capstone projects such as senior theses. Faculty are currently engaged in intra- and inter-departmental conversations about designing rubrics, and several will utilize these tools this year. The data generated from this form of assessment are one example of the kinds of findings that will serve as the basis for further discussion and analysis college-wide.

4 Work Plan and Methods

Throughout the course of the grant, project teams will be meeting on each campus to complete the initiatives outlined above. The Co-investigators and the Leadership Teams from each campus will meet regularly to share progress, examine one another's work, and provide support. As the initiatives proceed, the Co-investigators will document the work for assessment purposes and for later dissemination. We expect conference presentations showcasing the work to occur as early as the second year of the project. A Project Timeline, which includes a schedule for inter-campus meetings and visits, is attached.

5. Project Evaluation Plan

Summative evaluation occurs at both the local level for the lead campuses and holistically for the entire project. The interim and summer meetings provide for formative assessment as the project unfolds and mid-course corrections as necessary.

Our Teagle project will be considered successful if:

1. Each participating institution meets its project goals (immediately below).

2. The colleges participating in the Summer Teagle “Data into Action” Institutes in 2011 and 2012 report that the Institutes help promote, shape and inform their own projects for using assessment data to inform action.
3. The co-investigators are able to describe transferable models for using assessment data to inform faculty and curricular development in conference presentations and written articles.

We will know the Connecticut College project is successful if:

1. The College, working with a variety of stakeholders, including faculty, pilots, assesses, and revises an effective plan for systematically distributing, discussing, understanding, and then acting upon our data about student learning.
2. The Center for Teaching & Learning, working with the Senior Research Analyst and a group of faculty, design, implement, and assess a series of workshops focused on using the data we have about “academic challenge” to help faculty improve and assess their teaching in order to enhance student learning.
3. Using our data from the Wabash National Study, NSSE, and additional classroom-based assessments, faculty implement clear plans for continuous improvement on both their departmental and course levels.

We will know the Allegheny College project is successful if:

1. The College articulates a set of institutional student learning outcomes and underlying questions to be addressed in every academic department review.
2. The College develops a standard report drawing on existing data that serves as a useful starting point for departmental consideration of student achievement with respect to institutional learning outcomes.
3. Academic departments use data drawn from the standard report in an ongoing way to inform decisions on faculty, curricular, and program development.

We will know the Colorado College project is successful if:

1. Each department and interdisciplinary program has begun to modify its curriculum and pedagogy at the program (progression through the major; capstone) and/or individual faculty/course level in response to assessment findings that have been derived from direct assessment measures based on clear, observable learning outcomes developed by faculty.
2. The Office of Institutional Research and the Crown Faculty Center have jointly created workshops and documents that help faculty members understand the information and analyses available to them from college-wide surveys such as NSSE, CIRP, and CSS, such that faculty members can put the data to use to improve pedagogy and curricular design at the individual/course and program level.
3. Individuals from different departments and programs are gathering on at least a semi-regular basis in order to share their experiences of using assessment to inform curricular and pedagogical improvement.

We will know the Franklin Pierce project is successful if

1. The University collects, analyzes, and effectively communicates data that deepen our understanding of our students and our overall effectiveness at meeting out current core learning goals.

2. The faculty articulates clearly defined goals and learning objectives for general education and links them to our planning for a revised integrated core curriculum.
3. The University uses the momentum of each Teagle stage to provide a basis for collaborative faculty development work that leads to pedagogical strategies and curricular design that address the new learning goals and results in a detailed and useful assessment plan.

Project Investigators

Connecticut College is ideally suited to lead this project. Its senior administration, including the President and the Dean of the Faculty, are strongly committed to using assessment data to improve student learning. We have a record of discussing such data on campus, most recently our first-year results from the Wabash National Study. Our recently-endowed Faculty Center for Teaching & Learning (CTL) is well established and offers a wide variety of programming, which enjoys tremendous faculty support and participation. The CTL leadership is involved in the national conversations about student learning and assessment, and works regularly with colleges across the country to help improve the teaching and learning on their campuses. Our institutional researcher regularly collaborates with the CTL, bringing data into our conversations about faculty teaching and student learning.

All four project leaders are involved on the national level in helping institutions work with assessment data and advancing teaching and learning at small liberal arts colleges. On their campuses they work closely with both faculty members and their Chief Academic Officers (except Dr. Mooney, who is the CAO), all of whom strongly support this project. A comprehensive list of Project Team Participants is attached.