

Improving the Educational Quality of Liberal Arts Colleges

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Summary

- A large body of research points to a core set of teaching practices and institutional conditions that promote student learning in college.
- *When* residential liberal arts colleges are more effective at promoting student learning than other kinds of institutions, it is because they create higher levels of these teaching practices and institutional conditions than other kinds of institutions.
- Common metrics of institutional quality such as national rankings, selectivity, faculty scholarly productivity, teaching load, and institutional resources devoted to instruction correlate very little with how often students experience these good practices and conditions at any given institution.
- Faculty and administrators at many liberal arts colleges attempt to enhance the educational impact of their institutions by creating or expanding high-impact programs such as first-year experiences, internships, study abroad, and capstone experiences. Unfortunately, the impact of these efforts is often limited. The effect of high-impact programs depends primarily on whether these programs create the core teaching practices and conditions that promote student learning. If the faculty and staff at an institution are not adept at creating these practices and conditions, adding new programs will not matter. Conversely, institutions that already have high levels of these good practices and conditions will not benefit unless the new programs engage students who would not otherwise encounter these good practices and conditions.
- The liberal arts colleges that make the greatest strides in strengthening their educational impact have fostered a culture that supports the ongoing development and honest evaluation of educational experiments by students, staff, and faculty to improve teaching and learning. This culture is rooted in (a) a deep institutional commitment to the ongoing improvement of student learning; (b) a willingness to question the impact of courses, majors, and programs; (c) strong support from academic leaders, division chairs, department chairs, and senior faculty for people who engage in improvement efforts; (d) a sense of trust, respect, and collegiality among faculty, staff, administrators, and students; and (e) an emphasis on small-scale, evidence-based improvement efforts that do not require additional resources.

*Essays and commentary
for practitioners who
use evidence to
improve learning*

In this document, we highlight some of what we have learned over the past ten years, both from the Center's research and from its collaboration with residential liberal arts colleges from across the country to improve the quality of liberal arts education.

Teaching practices and institutional conditions that promote student learning

Over the last 30 years, higher education research,¹ ranging from classroom studies to multi-institutional projects such as the Wabash National Study, points to a core set of teaching practices and institutional conditions that promote student learning. These include the following:

Sound teaching

- Prompt feedback
- Well-organized classes and courses
- Frequent use of clear examples and explanations
- Facing the class when talking
- Frequent use of appropriate techniques to gauge how well students are learning
- Consistent, clear, and relevant application of grades
- Providing clear criteria for what constitutes strong performance
- Clear and accessible interpretations of ideas and theories
- Effective use of time both in and out of class
- Institutional mechanisms that provide ongoing support so that the majority of faculty are engaged in work to continuously evaluate and improve their skills in these areas

Faculty and staff dispositions toward and attitudes about students and teaching

- Visible interest in teaching on the part of faculty and staff
- Visible interest in helping students grow in more than just academic areas on the part of faculty and staff
- Interest on the part of faculty and staff in talking with students, often about matters of substance, outside of class

Challenge and effort

- Ensuring that students engage in intense, time-consuming, intellectual work
- Ensuring that students spend time writing, reading, and engaging in intellectually stimulating activities
- Creating assignments that *require* synthesis, analysis, evaluation, and other higher-order intellectual activities for successful completion
- Creating multiple opportunities for students to apply ideas, concepts, and theories from their classes to consequential, real-world activities

¹ See examples at:

- Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. F. (1987). Seven principles for good practices in undergraduate education. *American Association of Higher Education Bulletin*, 39(7), 3-7.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2013). *A fresh look at student engagement—Annual results 2013*. Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research: Bloomington, IN. Retrieved November 25, 2013, from the National Survey of Student Engagement website: http://nsse.iub.edu/html/annual_results.cfm.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.
- Research & publications on the Wabash National Study website: <http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-research/>.

Diversity

- Ensuring that students engage in frequent, serious, and meaningful interactions with people who are different from themselves
- Ensuring that students seriously engage ideas, books, modes of thought, forms of expression, etc., that differ from those with which they are familiar and comfortable

These are by no means the only factors that influence student learning, but based on multiple studies, which use a variety of research designs, they emerge consistently as being important.

Differences between institutions

Even after taking into account many of the incoming qualities and experiences that differentiate students at liberal arts colleges from students at other kinds of institutions, liberal arts college students typically experience higher levels of these good practices and conditions than do students at other institutions. While students at liberal arts colleges report higher levels of these practices and conditions *on average*, it is important to note that there is considerable variation among liberal arts colleges on the level of these practices and conditions.

Aside from size, with smaller institutions typically having higher levels of these good practices and institutional conditions, there are no obvious patterns that distinguish high-performing colleges from those that have lower levels on these practices and conditions. For example, students at highly selective, nationally ranked liberal arts colleges are no more likely to experience high levels of these good practices and conditions than students at less selective, lower-ranked or unranked liberal arts colleges. The table below includes basic information about five liberal arts colleges that have the highest overall scores in the Wabash National Study on these good practices and institutional conditions. ²

Five Liberal Arts Colleges with Highest Overall Scores in Wabash National Study Good Practices and Institutional Conditions:

	College 1	College 2	College 3	College 4	College 5
Average SAT	Not required	Not required	1400	965	1150
Student body size	700	300	2000	900	900
Distinctive curricular elements	Design and defend major; mandatory fieldwork	Design and defend major	Trimester system	Education for children and families	Comprehensive exams
Student/Faculty ratio	9 to 1	6 to 1	9 to 1	11 to 1	11 to 1
% Admitted	70%	85%	30%	70%	60%
Largest major	English	Visual & Performing Arts	Biology	Social Work	History
Setting	Rural	Rural	Small town	City	Small town

² We added an institution's average scores on the good practices and institutional conditions mentioned above and then subtracted its score on the level of negative diversity interactions to calculate an overall good practice score. We included negative diversity interactions in this calculation because even low levels of these interactions can have a negative impact on many of the outcomes we measured in the Wabash National Study.

	College 1	College 2	College 3	College 4	College 5
Tuition, fees, room and board	\$54,000	\$46,000	\$54,000	\$42,000	\$41,000
Proportion of students receiving Pell grants	25%	30%	15%	35%	30%
US News Top 50	No	No	Yes	No	No
Faculty research a funded priority	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Graduate programs	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No

These five institutions range in selectivity, institutional wealth, faculty research productivity, admissions practices, location, and so on. Administrators at any one of these institutions would not consider the others to be peers, and some of those administrators would even be reluctant to call some of these colleges “real” liberal arts colleges, but from the standpoint of creating educational conditions that promote student learning on a broad array of outcomes, these colleges are all comparable.

Creating new programs to increase student learning

One course that many liberal arts colleges follow to enhance their educational impact is to create or expand programs such as first-year seminars, interdisciplinary courses, study abroad, internships, capstone courses, and undergraduate research. Unfortunately, such changes may not improve student learning. The reasons for this are twofold. First, when they are effective, these programs work because they create the very kind of practices and conditions outlined at the beginning of this document. At colleges at which faculty and staff generally are not effective at creating these practices and conditions, creating or expanding a program simply shifts these less-than-effective faculty and staff to a new program. If a faculty member has poor teaching skills and is not very interested in students, then including that person in a new first-year program or asking him or her to teach a capstone course will not change those skills and dispositions without a significant investment in faculty development. The opposite is also true. Often, effective faculty are attracted to new or expanded programs. But shifting their efforts to the new program takes them away from things they are currently doing, with no net increase in good practices and conditions for students.

The second challenge that institutions face when creating or expanding programs is that these programs tend to attract students who already have the qualities that the programs seek to create. For example, there is clear evidence from a number of studies³ that students who pursue study abroad already have many of the attitudes and dispositions that such programs are designed to promote before they go abroad. There is also evidence that while students grow on these attitudes and dispositions following their study abroad, their net growth is no greater than that of students who do not participate in study abroad. In other words, students who participate in study abroad start higher and end higher on a variety of attitudes and dispositions, but based on some of these studies,⁴ they do not seem to grow more than students who do not participate in study abroad

^{3&4}Twombly, S. B., Salisbury, M. H., Tumanut, S. D., & Klute, P. (2012). Study abroad in a new global century: Renewing the promise, refining the purpose, *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 38(4).

programs. The challenge of creating or expanding programs as a way of strengthening educational impact is that the majority of students who end up being served by these new and expanded programs may turn out to be the very students who would benefit the least.

We have learned that improvement efforts that focus on creating or expanding programs can be effective if (a) they include significant and carefully constructed faculty development that increases the capacity of participating faculty to deliver on the kinds of practices and conditions that we described at the beginning of this document; and (b) these new and expanded programs are designed to include a broad range of students, including those who normally do not participate in programs like these.

Improving our educational impact

If adding or expanding programs is not necessarily a high-yield path to improving the impact of liberal arts education, what is? We believe the most important predictor of a liberal arts college's capacity to systematically improve the quality of its educational offerings is whether the institution's culture is designed to sustain improvement. Specifically, based on our experience working with liberal arts colleges over the last ten years, we see the following qualities as signals that predict a liberal arts college's capacity to improve the quality of its educational programs:

- A core group of respected faculty who are working hard, year-round, on improving teaching and learning not just in their own classes, but also in their departments, their divisions, and the college as a whole.
- A serious and pervasive institutional commitment to the ongoing improvement of student learning. This commitment rises above the bland praise of teaching and learning in which *every* college or university engages, and includes (a) clear signals from senior administrators, division chairs, department chairs, and senior and midcareer faculty that continually improving teaching and learning is the institution's single most important priority; and (b) evidence that institutional decisions actually align with that stated priority.
- A collegial, trusting, and supportive faculty and staff environment that encourages the ongoing creation of educational experiments. This environment must provide sufficient trust and support so that there is no dishonor when these experiments fall short, as they often do.
- Thoughtful, publicly expressed skepticism on the part of faculty about the impact of their courses, majors, and programs, along with an appetite for learning more about the impact of those courses, majors, and programs, regardless of where that inquiry leads.
- A willingness on the part of senior administrators, department chairs, and program directors to adopt a "take and hold" mentality toward improvement in which assessment and faculty development efforts are aimed at a series of small-scale, evidence-based improvement projects that, over the course of years, accumulate to produce large-scale changes. In this approach, efforts to improve some element of student learning happen all the time, and the work is not put off until "the next departmental review," "we get a new position," or "we get more money from the college."

Once again, these qualities are not linked in any systematic way that we can discern to institutional resources, reputation, type of curriculum, the presence or absence of applied programs, the presence or absence of a teaching and learning center, or a host of other institutional markers that people take as proxies for quality.

Our experience in working with liberal arts colleges over the last decade is that most of their improvement efforts are directed toward visible proxies for high-quality education—such as hiring more faculty, erecting new buildings, improving facilities, creating new programs, and reducing teaching loads—all of which cost a great deal of money, but none of which, on their own, actually improve the quality of liberal arts education. On the other hand, very few colleges engage in the low-cost and high-effort work of building a sustainable culture—including governance structures and resource allocation—that supports ongoing and effective efforts to improve student learning.