Engaging Institutions in Improving Student Learning through a National Study

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A common phrase for conceptualizing change is "Think global, act local." The phrase points us to creating large-scale changes by acting to foster change in specific local contexts. Think global, act local very much describes the work of the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. The Center of Inquiry's mission is to collaborate with institutions to gather and use evidence to strengthen liberal arts education. The Center works to strengthen liberal arts education nationally by working with individual liberal arts institutions to use evidence to enact changes on their campuses. Our goal is to assist campuses in improving student learning in a manner that is consistent with the unique ways in which different institutions define and enact the liberal arts. Although we often speak as if the liberal arts and liberal arts education point to a specific set of ideas, the reality is that institutions approach the liberal arts in a rich variety of ways. We view this variety as an enormous source of strength that will ensure the long-term vibrancy and relevance of the liberal arts to higher education. Hence, we believe that the Center's efforts to strengthen liberal arts institutions according to their unique missions and outcomes also strengthens liberal arts education as a whole.

The Center of Inquiry utilizes a two-step approach to assessment.

1. Gather high-quality quantitative and qualitative evidence on student learning.
2. Work with faculty, staff, administrators, and students to use this evidence to strengthen student learning.

In the following sections we will describe in more detail how we approach each step.

Gathering High-Quality Evidence

Although the Center works with liberal arts institutions to facilitate their efforts to use virtually any assessment information they collect, we increasingly find that using data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education is an especially useful way for us to begin our work with institutions. Information from the Wabash National Study provides comparative, cross-institutional information on a common set of measures. We are also gaining expertise in usefully applying information from the study's quantitative measures and follow-up interviews in a variety of institutional contexts.

The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education is a longitudinal project designed to investigate critical teaching practices and institutional conditions that impact liberal arts education. This study began in 2006 and includes over 7,500 students from 26 colleges and universities across the country. The study includes quantitative measures of six broad liberal education outcomes, as well as a wide array of measures of student experience including the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (See http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/nationalstudy.) Although this project was initially designed as a research study, it includes a number of qualities that are useful for institutional assessment. Specifically,

1. The study is longitudinal which allows us to track changes in individual students.

2. We use reliable measures of student outcomes and student experiences. This allows us to examine individual variability in student learning and student experiences within campuses and to connect quantitative data from the study with individual student data from the institutions.

3. The study includes measures of outcomes *and* experiences for each student. Thus, we can look at the teaching practices and institutional conditions that promote student learning within each campus.

4. Finally, we have adopted an action research design so that we can measure the impact of changes that occur between the first and fourth year of the study.

It is important to add that we do not see the evolution of this project from its initial focus on basic research to its current and future focus on assessment as a change that compromises the intellectual quality of the project. Indeed, we see the ongoing application of knowledge, with the goal of improving student learning, as an even greater intellectual challenge. As Anthony S. Bryk, the new president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching put it, "In my own work, which has been in the K-12 area, there are lots of things that you think you know, but until you actually make those ideas work on the job floor, in the classroom, in schools, in community colleges, the idea of best practices can be quite elusive. In this domain, the development of new wisdom is as much about being able to apply your insights in the context of real problems as about some abstracted form of knowledge. . ." (Chronicle of Higher Education 2008)

Working with faculty, staff, administrators, and students to support change

For many assessment experts, using evidence to make changes to promote student learning is an implicit component of good assessment. However, given the challenges of assessing broad liberal education outcomes, our experience is that many campuses devote so much time, effort, and resources to gathering evidence, that using it to systematically make changes to improve student learning becomes an often neglected afterthought. Indeed, even respected national assessment efforts focus on creating high-quality data for campuses on the assumption that creating such evidence will, on its own, prompt changes that improve student learning. In essence, many of us have focused solely on creating the information that would prompt change rather than on refining the processes by which information (much of which we already have) is used to create changes. We now believe that gathering high-quality evidence may be only the first, and *perhaps the easiest*, step towards initiating changes that promote student learning. Enacting change within complex social and economic campus environments may, in fact, be much more challenging. In the course of the Center's work we have identified a number of factors that make it challenging to move from evidence to change:

1. *Challenges in interpreting evidence* – Many faculty and staff do not have a background in the quantitative or qualitative analytic methods commonly used in assessment efforts, and therefore they have a difficult time finding useful information in these analyses. Assessment evidence must often be translated for broad audiences.

2. *Murky connection between evidence and action* – Careful analyses of rich information can lead to so much information that it is difficult to see a small number of clear "do-able" actions that follow from that information.

3. *Paralysis by analysis* – Sometimes the desire to follow strict research protocols required by scholarly work gets in the way of collecting "good enough" assessment data. The desire to keep asking deeper questions about assessment evidence may also displace the desire to act on good enough assessment knowledge. It is important to remember that detailed, careful, many-years-long analysis is a natural and valued form of inquiry for many faculty, but adopting this approach for assessment will make it more difficult to act.

4. *Assessment start-up costs diminish capacity for change* – The human and economic costs of gathering assessment data are so high that they often consume the resources necessary for making changes. Knowing this, we deliberately chose low-cost measures for the Wabash National Study. Another

version of this problem occurs when all of the intellectual effort in developing an assessment plan is directed toward designing, administering, and analyzing the assessment data, but little or no planning is directed at considering ways of positively responding to the assessment data. In essence, there is no planning for change.

5. *A lack of change expertise* – It is important to remember that we have only begun to engage in serious efforts to measure student learning beyond the classroom. Therefore, the expertise in using such information to create change is not yet widespread. We can all think of individuals, and even organizations, who have successfully turned around admissions programs and fostered the implementation of dramatic curricular changes. We can even identify people who know how to develop good assessment programs. But can we point to individuals or institutions that have used evidence to dramatically improve student learning? There are a few individuals who have fostered such changes, but they are not legion, especially at selective liberal arts institutions.

Over the last three years we have collaborated with faculty and administrators at a variety of institutions to develop site-visit protocols, retreats, data reports, and workshops to overcome some of these problems (see http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/assessment). Nonetheless, our work of learning the different ways that we can help institutions move from assessment to improvement is still in its infancy. Therefore, the lessons we describe below are preliminary and are aimed at creating an atmosphere in which the possibility that assessment evidence will inform changes can breathe. These lessons are the "critical steps" that we try and follow in our work with campuses:

1. *Create opportunities to learn what questions faculty and staff have about their students.* Many campus assessment programs begin with key questions that emerge from formal discussions about institutional mission and departmental or program learning goals. These are obviously important items to address in any assessment program, but it is also important to create informal moments in which one asks faculty and staff to reflect on what they would most like to know about their students. Listening to these questions, explicitly valuing their importance, and including some of them in an assessment program, whether or not they are directly connected to the formal goals of the institution, is a way of connecting that assessment program to campus practitioners.

2. *Be open about the limitations of assessment evidence.* Faculty, staff, administrators, and students are smart people, and they understand that any attempt to gauge the complex goals that we embrace at our institutions will be imperfect at best. Admit this fact early and often.

3. *Be transparent about assessment devices.* Assessment can be a frightening process for faculty because it can be seen as a process that creates judgments about their effectiveness. This is a natural human reaction that we all share. This anxiety, and the skepticism that often accompanies anxiety, is heightened when people do not know about the instruments, surveys, and protocols that are being used in a campus assessment process. Ensure that faculty, staff, and administrators have full access to the various assessment devices that you are using. Giving them a chance to "kick the tires" on these devices and ask questions about how they will be used is an important way of alleviating some of these concerns, especially if such discussion is combined with public acknowledgement of the limitations of these devices.

4. *Share the results of assessment.* Just as public discussion of scholarly work plays a critical role in both vetting the quality of the work and determining whether the work is worthy of being incorporated into the body of the discipline, the public discussion of assessment plays an important role in determining whether or not the evidence revealed in that assessment has a chance of inspiring changes that will impact student learning. We have seen too many institutions in which assessment information, especially that which contains "bad news," is carefully controlled or even sequestered. Often, the reasons for doing this make sense. Perhaps the campus is in the midst of a serious crisis or controversy, and the assessment information would not have a beneficial impact in that milieu. Administrators may need time to develop a strategy for rolling out the information so that it can lead to positive change. While there may be good short-term reasons for withholding the evidence, common sense tells us that evidence cannot have institutional impact if people do not know about it.

5. *Make sure that assessment has a visible payoff.* Faculty, staff, administrators, and students are rational human beings who would prefer to spend their time on tasks that make a difference. Assessment, by its very nature, requires time and effort from almost everyone on campus. People will very quickly tire of working on assessment that has no visible benefit on their teaching and learning. In fact, without palpable benefit, people will come to see assessment as a process that interferes with their efforts to teach and learn. Assessment programs should quickly lead to administrative responses that indicate that collecting evidence

will have impact. Setting aside resources to allow for such responses before the assessment program is

initiated is critical. If action is an implicit part of assessment, then plans for action need to be an explicit

part of the development of any assessment program.

The Center's work now focuses on collaborating with institutions to find ways to develop assessment programs

that take advantage of these lessons learned. It would be nice to say that we have learned these lessons from

successful cases, but more fitting, perhaps, to admit that we have learned most of them from our struggles and

failures. When the Center began its work, we had hoped to build the strength of liberal arts education by helping

institutions create high-quality assessment programs. We now see that we will fall short of our mission until student

learning at institutions with which we collaborate is demonstrably improved.

In his book *Better*, Atul Gawande (2007) describes three core requirements for improving the effectiveness of

medical treatment: diligence, the drive to "do right," and ingenuity or "thinking anew." In explaining how ingenuity

helps doctors improve the effectiveness of their care, Gawande states, "Ingenuity is often misunderstood. It is not a

matter of superior intelligence but of character. It demands more than anything a willingness to recognize failure, to

not paper over the cracks, and to change. It arises from deliberate, even obsessive, reflection on failure and a

constant searching for new solutions." (Gawande 2007, 8–9) We can also learn from this advice as we strive to

improve the effectiveness of our institutions.

Although most proponents of assessment would argue that deliberating about our failures and constantly

searching for new solutions to improve student learning are necessary parts of good assessment, we believe that far

too many assessment efforts focus solely on finding ways to measure learning outcomes and on packaging those

measures to prove the institution's worth to outsiders. This is very hard and important work, but it is not sufficient

for improving student learning. As we continue to "think global and act local," the challenge before us is to take the

same energy and ingenuity we have used to develop assessment programs, and to direct that energy toward

discovering where our efforts to promote student learning fall short and creating changes in our institutions that will

help us improve student learning.

References:

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