Reforming Undergraduate Education: Lessons from Institutions that Improved Student Engagement

AAC&U Annual Meeting 2012, Washington DC

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• Pressure to reform to...
  – Improve student success
  – Increase experiences needed for 21st century economy
  – Ensure institution has conditions in place to maximize student engagement
  – Demonstrate and improve overall educational quality

Assessment Challenge

Although colleges and universities have increased assessment activities, there is less evidence that they have closed the assessment loop by following up to see whether changes undertaken have produced improvements.

Literature on Institutional Change

• Implementing large-scale, transformational change in colleges and universities is difficult, due in part to their complexity and also to their governance practices (Cuban, 1999; Birnbaum, 2000).
• Overall, research on institutional change suggests that “institutional transformation” is rare and that, if change is possible, it is most likely to be incremental (Kezar, 2001).

Your Improvement Activities

• What improvement initiatives do you have underway?
• Who identified this as a problem?
• How have you used data to inform these efforts?
• How are you monitoring the impact of the improvement effort?
• How will you know you’re succeeding?
Our Interest in Improvement

- **Key Question:** Are institutions improving?
- **Proof of Concept:** Is NSSE achieving its institutional improvement aim?
- **Opportunity:** Institutions with multiple years of NSSE data makes it possible to assess change or stability in engagement over time.
  - Can NSSE results detect change on campus?
  - What can we learn about systematic improvement in colleges and universities?

NSSE annually gathers valid, reliable information on the extent to which students engage in and are exposed to proven educational practices that correspond to desirable learning outcomes.

- Results provide estimate of how students spend their time and what they gain from college.
- NSSE items represent empirically confirmed good practices: behaviors associated with student learning and development.

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NSSE Opportunity

NSSE’s aim is to improve quality in undergraduate education

- Document strengths
- Identify opportunities for improvement
- Motivate wider use of effective practices
- Strengthen the learning environment

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Learning to Improve Study

Phase 1: Detecting Change & Making Observations about Assessment and Improvement: Test different statistical methods to identify institutions where NSSE scales show significant change. Examine patterns of improvement in colleges and universities.

Phase 2: Accounting for and Understanding Change: After institutions are identified as showing change, can we learn more about what the institution did to effect change?

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How Much Improvement? On What? Benchmarks, HIPs, & Deep Approaches to Learning

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All 2001-2009 institutions that participated in NSSE at least four times.
Patterns of Change

- 41% of institutions demonstrated a pattern of improvement in at least one measure for first-year students, & 28% for seniors
- Percent of institutions whose scores declined across multiple administrations was trivial
- First-year student engagement may be more amenable to improvement than senior engagement (or, more institutions have targeted the FYE for improvement).

Are Institutions Improving?

Yes.

Systematic improvement efforts have paid off.

Findings: Improvement Over Time

- Improvement is possible!
- Positive trends outnumber negative ones, by margin of 7:1
- Areas of greatest improvement align with research-based practice (i.e. first-year experience programs) and with institutional priorities (diversity)

The Good News:

- It is possible to improve NSSE scores on measures of effective educational practice
- Institutions have generally been using results to guide reform efforts on campuses
- However, we don’t know how reforms happen, or if institutions are tracking or documenting their change story

Phase 2: Learning to Improve Project

Learning to Improve Study

- More in-depth study of change from institutions’ point of view.
- Institutions where change was detected:
  - Was the change planned?
  - Are they aware of their improved results?
  - What accounts for the improvement?
Learning to Improve Study
• Representatives from 64 institutions with improved scores responded to a questionnaire about their change efforts.
• Asked about motivation for change, actions, awareness of improved scores, key players in effort, etc.

What Accounts for Change in Scores at Institutions?

Intentional Reform?
What proportion of the 64 institutions reported that they had implemented change efforts that contributed to improved results?
- almost all (a)
- 2/3 (b)
- about half (c)
- a third (d)

Motivation for Change
• What is motivating change on your campus?
• What has been most influential?

Motivation for Change
1. Institutional commitment to improving undergraduate education
2. Faculty interest in improving undergraduate education
3. Data revealed concern
4. National call for accountability
5. Governing board mandate
6. State board or legislative mandate
7. Accreditation
8. Internal program review

Characterizing Change Efforts
• “Supersystematic” – integrated strategic planning, pushing all fronts
• Targeted, focused
• By-product of larger campus reform (e.g., Gen Ed)
• First Year Focus
• Major/Department site for change
• Identity Distinction or Refinement
• Distributed/Many Levers
Type of Change: First Year Focus

University of Akron

- Participated in Foundations of Excellence self-study with goal to create a more vibrant first year experience.
- Used data to identify what worked and what needed improving in the first year.
- Structured process to study and implement reforms: FYE Task Force and Student Success & Retention Committee (faculty-administrative committee)

What Facilitates Change?

- Involvement in Initiatives – Foundations of Excellence; Teagle Foundation project to improve student learning; Bringing Theory to Practice; Wabash Study; AAC&U LEAP project; Internal & External grants...
- Presidential/Provost Leadership
- Meaningful Strategic Planning process
- Improvement aspects of accreditation: SACS QEP; HLC AQIP; WASC
- Real campus problem – persistence, diversity incident

Learning to Improve: Case Study Sites

- Augustana College
- Clark University
- Lynchburg College
- Ohio University
- Santa Clara University
- Southern Connecticut State University
- The University of West Florida
- Wright State University

Emerging Themes from Site Visits

1. Grants, Pilots, External Initiatives
2. Stability & Trust in Leadership
3. Physical space/creation of new learning spaces
4. Comprehensive & Targeted strategic planning
5. Data Informed & Culture of continuous improvement
6. Strong role of faculty – impact of generational change
7. Intentional partnerships of administrative areas – Student and Academic Affairs

Grants, Pilot Projects, Involvement in External Initiatives

- Grants supported initial work, and then were sustained at Santa Clara
- Multiple Teagle grants at Augustana provided opportunities for widespread faculty involvement in improvement projects
- Foundations of Excellence at Ohio University
Stability of and Trust in Leadership

• Stable senior leadership
• Trust in the talents of VPSA, Dean of Students, Deans, other director level staff

Try something, no penalty for failure

Physical Space for Interaction/Collaboration

• Santa Clara & Clark University Library renovation provided new space for student & faculty collaboration; meeting rooms...
• Ohio University and Wright State – “Laptops-2-Go” programs
• Lynchburg athletic field

Targeted Effort informed by Data & Research:
Southern Connecticut State University

No First-year Experience in 2005; 50% students in FYE in 2007; All in FYE in 2009

FYE components:
• Orientation
• Common read
• Learning communities
• Inquiry 101 seminar
• Academic tracking & early intervention
• Student success workshops
• Academic support workshops & study groups
• FYE program office

First-year Trend Example

Data-Informed Change

• Problem focus: Conducted studies and created committees with expectation to examine and act on results (“Think Forces” at Augustana)

• Now, faculty ask: Where are the data to support this?
• “As resources became more scarce, evidence was required to make the case” (Ohio University)

More evidence of “Positive Restlessness*”

Continuous Improvement, Constant Tinkering

“Talking all the time about what works well and what needs to be fixed”

• Second Mile at WSU
• “Monica” at SCSU

(*from Student Success in College, 2010)
**Repurposing Institutional Research**

- Southern CT created Office of Assessment & Planning to bring IR into broader institutional planning efforts – rejected old notion of IR staff as “short order cooks”
- Perception of IR staff as collaborators; supporters of institutional change; at the table for important educational discussions.

**Strong Role of Faculty**

- Advantaged generational shifts in faculty
- New faculty recruitment & orientation: *a site to fuel innovation*
- Prominence of Center for Teaching & Learning

**Robust Partnerships Between Student & Academic Affairs**

- Change facilitated by a robust partnership between academic & student affairs

**Making Change**

- Use data to focus attention.
- Improvement begins in small ways – *so start something!*
- Evaluate effectiveness of action.
- Recognize and celebrate innovation.

**To Ponder: Making Change**

- Any *surprises* about what accounts for reform?
- How does this jibe with your improvement efforts? What might these cases suggest?
- What is missing?

**Discussion and Comments**

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