Fugitive Knowledge: Documenting Data Use for the Collective Good

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"Data Talk" is Plentiful

- Escalating national discourse about educational quality, improvement, and accountability for results

- Insistent calls for data-driven decisions and a culture of evidence

- Rankings, performance-based funding, VSA, VFA, U-CAN,…
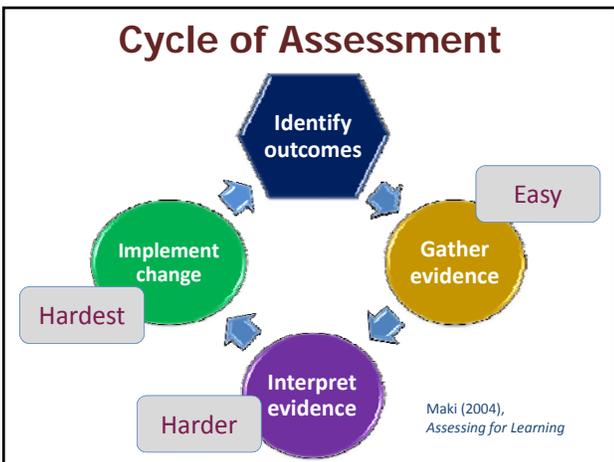
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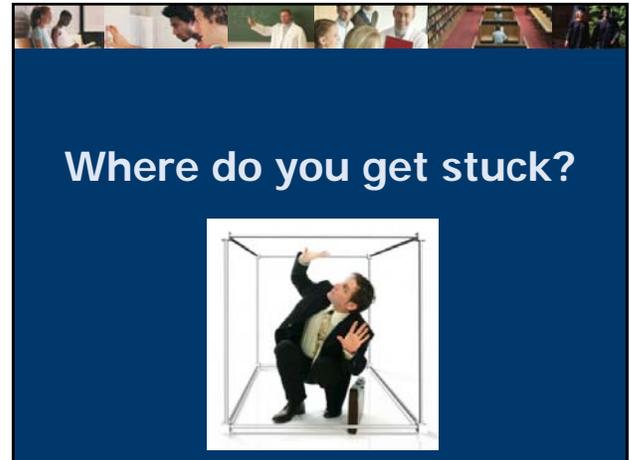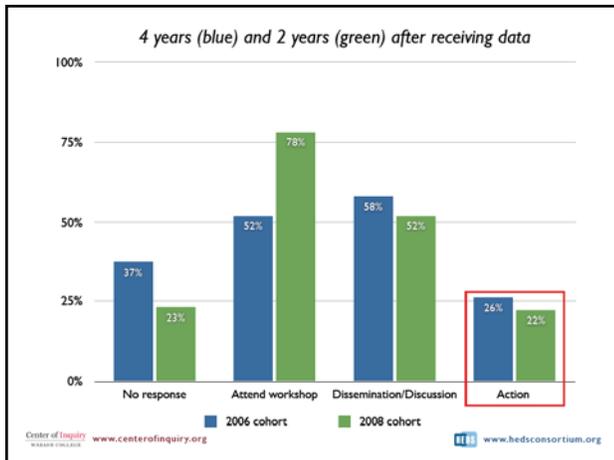

Data Are Being Collected

- **Assessment activity is widespread in U.S. higher education**
  (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009)

- **Faculty respondents from 49 colleges and universities (part of FSSE 2009):**
  - 75% said their institution is "Quite a bit" or "Very much" involved in assessment work

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What's the Use?

Cycle of Assessment

Identify outcomes

Easy — Gather evidence

Harder — Interpret evidence

Hardest — Implement change

Maki (2004), *Assessing for Learning*

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4 years after receiving data

No response 37%
Attend workshop 52%
Dissemination/Discussion 58%
Action 26%

2006 cohort

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4 years (blue) and 2 years (green) after receiving data

Where do you get stuck?

What we hear about data use

- We still have questions /
  We need more information

- And Yet…
  - Data are out there, but not being used
  - Drowning in data
  - Bogged down in data

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Fugitive Knowledge

Practitioners search for models that may be adapted to their context and needs, or assume that effective transformations of data to action must be "home grown" without the benefit of what others have learned.

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Purpose of this Session

- We need to illuminate the dark shadows of data use
  - Objective research is needed to examine the processes and results of data use
- Our proposal: Data use would be facilitated by developing collective knowledge about effective use (failures too!)
- Is this feasible? How to do it?

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What have we learned about data use from working with campuses in NSSE, NILOA, Teagle, Wabash National Study, Higher Education Data Sharing?

Advancing Data Use

- NSSE aims to promote assessment for improvement
- Strives to find examples of data use to share with users
- Documents data use examples, infuse examples into presentations, workshops, webinars, resources, and guides to reports

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Moving From Data to Action: *Lessons from the Field* (LFF)

- Documents the processes and outcomes of institutions that make use of NSSE results.
- Provides rich examples of what it means to *use* NSSE.

nsse.iub.edu/links/lessons_home

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What helps advance data use?

- Create a NSSE committee, team, or task force for communicating, sharing, interpreting results
- Share results widely – and in targeted ways – throughout campus to stimulate action
- Share results at the department level – *drive data to action*

SHARE

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What helps advance data use?

- Validate findings - link to other sources
- Post results on institutional Web site to enhance communication and promote transparency
- NSSE results can be used as a lens into current campus issues or concerns.
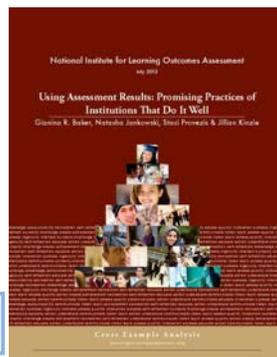 - Connect data to real campus issue

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Documenting & Synthesizing Practice: Student Learning Outcome Assessment

Nine case studies

- Each campus has particular way into data use to improve student learning outcomes

Cross case analysis

National Institute for
Learning Outcomes Assessment
Making Learning Outcomes Usable & Transparent

What Helps advance data use?

Advanced assessment practice by:

1. Focusing assessment efforts
2. Harnessing accountability for internal improvement
3. Communicating widely about assessment
4. Allowing time for internal stakeholders to make meaning of and to reflect on assessment results

National Institute for
Learning Outcomes Assessment
Making Learning Outcomes Usable & Transparent

Lessons from Teagle projects using evidence to improve student learning

What facilitates data use?

✓ **Act on data on hand. *You don't need more!***
✓ Employ faculty-friendly incentive structure
✓ Many roads lead to the assessment mountaintop
✓ Celebrate small wins
✓ Academic leadership is essential
✓ **Capitalize on the power of peer influence, accountability to the collaborative**

What helps - Leadership

- **Assessment leaders**
  - Administrators and "people with binders"
    ‣ *Grit, persistence, years-long sustained focus*
    ‣ *High institutional and emotional intelligence*
      - Understand the culture, governance structures, and faculty and staff values
      - Know where their students are coming from, where the resources are located, and which levers to push
    ‣ *Make "practical" assessment decisions*
      - "Given the governance structures, history, culture, and values of my institution, which among these will help us move forward toward improving students' education?"

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What helps - Connecting assessment with. . .

- **Connecting with external accountability to provide motivation**
  - Accreditation (but with great care)
  - Embedding assessment in multi-institution projects
- **Connecting assessment with high visibility, high priority campus projects**
  - Campus-based initiatives, grants, consortial initiatives
  - In many cases, collecting more data *even when it wasn't needed* was part of making a project visible
- **Connecting assessment with students**
  - Informal discussions, student-led focus groups engaging student led publications or government

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What has helped on your campus?

What holds data use back?

- **Simply sending a report, sharing data with no context or expectations for use**
- **Failing to create occasions, forums, to *discuss and make meaning* of results**
- **Lack of a system for following up on data use and action**
- **Collecting more, and more and more data**
- **Failing to establish relevancy**

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What holds data use back?

- **Assessment data that are disaggregated across campus silos**
- **The challenge of creating an actionable narrative from disparate kinds of assessment evidence**
- **Leaders who are captivated by "bright, shiny objects"**
- **The challenge of making "small scale" iterative improvement from regularly collected evidence**

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What holds data use back?

- **Forgetting that action results from _evidence not data_**
  - **Data**
    - _Values of qualitative or quantitative variables, belonging to a set of items_
  - **Evidence**
    - _When you and your colleagues have made sense of and come to some agreement about what the data are telling you with regard to some element of student learning or student experience_

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Collective Knowledge

- **How can data use stories be shared, borrowed from, built upon?**
  - Infrastructure?
  - Incentives?
  - Obstacles?
  - How to facilitate access?
  - What about peer review?