Making Change in the First College Year: Lessons from Institutions that Improved Student Engagement
25th International First Year Experience Conference 2012

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Reforming Undergraduate Education

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

Institutional Reform Agenda Not New
- At least 25 years old...
- 1984 report, Involvement in Learning:
  - proposed research on quality: “What are the most effective organizational strategies, policies, and processes to maximize student learning?”
  - emphasized improving educational quality
  - challenged institutions to adopt strategies, policies, and processes to maximize use of evidence to inform improvement

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 in the First Year of College 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?

Change is Hard. Yet, Some Institutions Are Doing It!!!
Project DEEP: A study of High-Performing Institutions
What do educationally effective institutions do to foster student engagement and success?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Six Shared Conditions of Educationally Effective Institutions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “Living” Mission and “Lived” Educational Philosophy</td>
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<td>2. Unshakeable Focus on Student Learning</td>
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<td>3. Environments Adapted for Educational Enrichment</td>
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<td>4. Clearly Marked Pathways to Student Success</td>
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<td>5. Improvement-Oriented Ethos</td>
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<td>6. Shared Responsibility for Educational Quality</td>
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Clearly Marked Pathways
- The many choices students face as they navigate college can create unnecessary confusion – *create coherent pathways*
- Make plain to students the resources and services available to help them succeed
- Redundant early warning systems and safety nets

“Positive Restlessness”
Q. What distinguishes institutions that engage students at high levels, have higher than predicted retention & graduation rates?
A. Continuous Improvement, Constant Tinkering;
   Data aid decision making;
   Systematically collected information about student & institutional performance validates anecdotes and personal experiences.

Educational Effectiveness: Guaranteed to Last?
Checked back with DEEP schools 5 years later...
- NSSE results about the same – a few slips, a few gains
- Graduation rates comparable, or better - 7 schools increased by 6%, and 3 by 10%
- Six shared conditions still hold
- Still positively restless

Keys to Sustaining the Student Success Agenda
- **a.** Student success *is an institutional priority when everyone—especially campus leaders—make it so.*
- **b.** Data-informed Action. Measure and act on what matters to student success
- **c.** Stay “positively restless” – pay attention to data
1,400 baccalaureate institutions participated between 2000-2010
Nearly 600 institutions had administered NSSE at least 4+ times

**OPPORTUNITY:** What can we learn about institutional improvement and change?

### 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 over time.
  - Can NSSE results detect change on campus?
  - What can we learn about systematic improvement in colleges and universities?

### Studying Change

- 532 institutions (at least 4 NSSE admin)
- Quantitative Analysis to detect evidence of change
- Identified 220 institutions change on at least 1 measure (out of 8)
- 64 institutions positive change (questionnaire, document review, scan)
- 8 case studies positive change

### 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

### Measures of Change

- Identified 8 measures:
  - NSSE Benchmarks: Academic Challenge, Active & Collaborative Learning, Student Faculty Interaction, Supportive Campus Environment
  - Plus, High-Impact practices, Higher order learning, Integrative learning, and Diversity Experiences
- About 225 institutions showed change on at least 1 measure

### Number of Measures That Improved

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>FY</th>
<th>SR</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Active &amp; Collaborative Learning</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Student-Faculty Interaction</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Supportive Campus Environment</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Higher Order Learning</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Diversity Experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Academic Challenge</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Integrative Learning</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. High-Impact Practices</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
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</table>
### Number of Measures That Declined

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
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<th>SR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Active &amp; Collaborative Learning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Student-Faculty Interaction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Supportive Campus Environment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Higher Order Learning</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Diversity Experiences</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Academic Challenge</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Integrative Learning</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>8. High-Impact Practices</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
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### Patterns of Change

- 41% of institutions saw improvement in measure for **first-year students**, 28% for seniors
- Percent of institutions whose scores declined across multiple administrations was trivial

### Are Institutions Improving?

**Yes.**

Positive trends outnumber negative ones, by margin of 7:1

### To Ponder

What do these patterns of improvement in the FY suggest for FYE?

- First-year student engagement may be more amenable to improvement than senior engagement (OR, more institutions have targeted the FYE for improvement). Particularly Active Learning, Student-Faculty Interaction

### How Does Change Happen?

**More In-Depth Study**

- More in-depth study from institutions' point of view
  - Was the change planned?
  - What accounts for improvement?
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

• Foundations of Excellence
  – 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)

Type of Change: First-Year Focus

Lynchburg College: “we have always done a lot to help students stay in college and think about how we move students out successfully.” Faculty

• Low persistence rate in 2005 captured people’s attention… formed Student Success Team
• Faculty teaching FY courses examined pedagogy, put in supports for challenging readings
• Sent dozen faculty & staff to FYE conference – helped implement practice
• First year persistence & success awards

Type of Change: First Year Focus

• Themed Learning Communities - 3 or more linked courses including an integrative first-year seminar connected through an interdisciplinary theme
  TLC Ex: “It’s Not Easy Being Green” First-year students conduct research on environmental issue in Indianapolis.

• Faculty and instructional team members work together to integrate the curricula
• Learning communities involving service-learning across the disciplines
• Realized significant retention & achievement gains

Type of Change: First Year Focus

• Enhanced student tutor program to support student success
• Faculty emphasize active and collaborative learning experiences in classes
• New student success center

Results Over Time – First-Year Student at TAMIU

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Improved by 5+ points = significant change
**Type of Change: First Year Focus**

- **Launched FYE pilot in 2007.** Orientation, FY Inquiry Seminar linked to general education reform, common read, faculty development
- Provost and VP Student Affairs collaborated on FYE pilot, brought to faculty curriculum committee to endorse
- Conducting cohort studies to study the impact of the program and determine where to continue to make improvements

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**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

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**First-Trend Example**

![Graph of Student-Faculty Interaction](image)

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**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

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**Site Visit Themes: Conditions for Change**

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

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**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

Targeted & Strategic Efforts

SCSU First Year Experience program

Pace University - Motivated by solid FY persistence data (77%) and success of the first year experience, the “Sophomore Working Group,” comprised of faculty, academic administrators, & student affairs professionals, began to focus on developing an “experience” for sophomores... Pace Plan, Sophomore Kick-Off, Career Exploration Course

Data-Informed Change

- Genuine curiosity about educational quality
- 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)

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

More evidence of “Positive Restlessness*”

Continuous Improvement, Constant Tinkering
“Talking all the time about what works well and what needs to be fixed”

- Educators dedicated to improvement....“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

To Ponder: Making Change, Sustaining Improvement

- Any *surprises* about what accounts for reform?
- How does this correspond to your FY improvement efforts?
- What is missing?

Wabash National Study: Assessment

Put aside the question: "What’s the best possible knowledge?"
Instead ask: “Do we have good enough knowledge to try something different that might benefit our students?”

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org

Making Change

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

Discussion and Comments

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“Learning to Improve” Project

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