

Structuring Faculty Work Explicitly Around Student Learning

Narrative

Introduction

In ongoing collaborative work funded by the Teagle Foundation (*Measuring Intellectual Development and Civic Engagement through Value-Added Assessment* 2005), our colleges have demonstrated that value-added assessment activities produced unanticipated implications in faculty development. When we took assessment beyond individual institutions, faculty members on six campuses engaged one another through their shared sense of responsibility for enhancing students' abilities in the fundamental liberal arts disciplines of writing, critical thinking, and civic engagement. As we discussed implementation of the outcomes of our value-added project back on our home campuses, we realized that the nature of faculty work and how faculty view the demands on their time is critically important and must be more fully understood.

Building on this unexpected finding of our work together, we propose now a further and, we believe, ultimately more important study in which we together consider the challenges of faculty work itself. In our analysis and conversations, we have come to recognize that the major impediment to faculty who seek to offer the engaging forms of learning opportunities that our colleges value most is the structure of a basic curriculum that has not been fundamentally changed in a century. Earlier commentators such as Linda McMillan (2002, *New academic compact: re-visioning the relationship between faculty and their institutions*) have identified some of the structural challenges inherent in the work of faculty today and provide a starting point for our proposed study. How can we enable faculty to engage students in ways that we know result in transformative education?

An emerging new curriculum - including undergraduate research, intensive mentoring of students, interdisciplinary learning, and service learning - has been layered over the traditional labor of teaching classes. Results of the new offerings on learning have been impressive, but one undesired result has been that our faculty cannot possibly sustain the demands of the new curriculum while maintaining the old. We propose to address this dilemma through a single, but potentially revolutionary inquiry: How would we re-imagine faculty work if we were to structure it explicitly around student learning?

Proposal

We propose to engage faculty representing a cross section of disciplines on each campus and across our seven colleges in a guided conversation on the 'high-impact practices' of Kuh that are most effective in their experience and the consequences of each approach on their work. Research on learning has identified 'high-impact experiences' (e.g. Kuh, 2008, *High-Impact Educational Practices*, AAC&U LEAP initiative; NSSE Annual Report 2007), environments in which students actively engage both the material under consideration and its connections to other knowledge. These experiences (e.g. participation in a learning community, research with a faculty member, study abroad, practicum, internship, field experience, or a culminating senior capstone experience) advance 'deep learning' - especially integrative and reflective learning, and self-reported gains in general education and personal social development. In the value-added

study, we learned that cross-disciplinary conversation about a shared topic like writing or critical thinking brought unexpected insights because of the range of approaches and expected outcomes represented in the room. Before coming together to design the details of the study, participants will be required to have read selections from the literature on ‘high-impact practices’ and reflect in writing on them focused by questions like these: Which ‘high-impact practices’ work best? What are the best measures of student learning in those experiences?

The design of the study will use ‘traditional’ teaching, which is still abundant on each campus, as the control. The variety of academic calendars (semesters, J-terms, M-terms) and graduation requirements among our seven colleges allow questions like these: How have we embedded ‘high-impact practices’ within the traditional structure of the course? Have we created pathways to connect such practices across different courses? What if we didn’t build student and faculty experience around the class unit at all? What could take its place? One discussion thread will examine how the calendar, class unit, and class schedule enables or impedes ‘high-impact practices’ and student learning.

Another outcome of our value-added study was that in critical thinking and civic engagement, students gained the most when the campus provided persistent attention to that learning outcome over four years. In our study of writing and critical thinking, for example, we found that the weight of a particular assignment was connected to the depth of learning, as was the length of papers. We found that structural factors such as the sequencing of courses or the use of a common curriculum had meaningful impact as well. Our study of civic engagement similarly demonstrated that institutional intentionality has substantial effect. We propose to examine our approaches to persistence within each campus of the seven college consortium around ‘high-impact practices’ and their relation to faculty work. Another discussion thread would be “what do we do in the classroom that we sustain over four years?” “How many are ‘high-impact’ and what makes this possible?”

These brain-storming conversations will lead to a variety of pilot projects across the seven colleges to implement and assess ‘high-impact practices’ that reflect progressively more radical approaches to changing faculty work:

- Embed new practices into existing structures.
- Make connections across existing structures.
- Substitute for existing structures.

Among these three approaches, we hope to determine whether we will discover comparable benefits to adjustment of current practice or whether the more radical reformulations result in the greatest benefit in student learning. We anticipate that pilot models would build upon existing practices on our campuses like embedding undergraduate research into classes within the major. Each campus would develop additional pilot models based perhaps on SENCER-type classes, connecting a range of courses via the questions or themes or skills development they pursue, or giving faculty the freedom to design full “immersion” semesters in which they work with students and other faculty outside the unit of the course to address a compelling issue.

Based on the trust already developed within our consortium to address serious topics collaboratively and the established close working relationships between high-level academic administration, institutional research staff and faculty leaders on all of our campuses, we are confident that we are ready to pursue this study of faculty work.

Assessment

All members of the consortium administer student surveys (e.g. NSSE, CLA, CIRP) and, in part, base institutional research and programmatic changes on those data sets. Two members of this consortium are participants and we are all watching the results of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education with great interest. Our project will be influenced by the Wabash study as we design pilot projects – adapting, adopting and combining effective practices that are shown to expand the degree to which students encounter ‘high-impact’ conditions and practices. Early results from the Wabash study identify categories of good teaching practices (faculty work) and related supportive institutional conditions - Good Teaching and High Quality Interactions with Faculty, Academic Challenge and High Expectations, Diversity Experiences – that will provide a starting point for some of the year one discussions on and between our campuses.

Many disciplines on our campuses have recognized and adopted mentored undergraduate research as an essential component of a contemporary pre-professional education. Have we really analyzed the consequences of this new call on faculty time and the work that can no longer be sustained to make room for the new component? The faculty time commitment to planning and implementing ‘high-impact’ experiences may well be greater than traditional course-based approaches that do not engage students as much in the creative aspects of learning. Some might argue that colleges like us have ‘fallen in love with’ experiential learning, but have not adjusted the architecture of faculty work accordingly.

Similarly, an extensive literature has developed around service learning (combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content) and the types of infrastructures and partnerships across and outside our campuses required for its success. Faculty on our campuses who adopt service learning pedagogies experience a time commitment that can vary from a minimal to significant increase over other approaches to the same material. Evidence indicates that learning is better and deeper in service learning – thus creating a tension on faculty time (work) between efficiency related to measures based on credit or course units and measures that reflect student learning obtained.

The abundance of information readily accessible over the Internet has even brought into question the role of faculty as ‘keepers of knowledge’ and encouraged the models of teacher as mentor and guide to facilitating access to knowledge through just-in-time information obtained online. Faculty are also asked to invest some of their time keeping abreast of the innovative uses of rapidly changing educational technologies and the social computing networks to which the current generation of students are attracted and to which devote much of their non-class time. How do our institutions recognize these types of faculty work, ‘count’ them in workload, or relate them to student learning?

Finally, there appears to be wide recognition that faculty careers go through phases in which attention to some aspects of faculty work naturally must consume a greater proportion than other aspects. Tensions between work and personal (family) time raise real challenges to healthy life balance. Surveys of faculty (e.g. HERI) on our campuses confirm the presence of this issue as we try to understand faculty work.

We will assess the impact of a wide range of ‘high-impact practices’ on faculty work, using standardized instruments familiar to us from previous work together such as HERI. In addition,

we will retain a consultant to conduct focus group of both students and faculty alike to learn more of the impact of these practices on faculty work.

Summary

Our proposed project builds on a successive collaboration centered on shared institutional mission in liberal arts higher education. Our primary focus is to understand to what extent the definitions of faculty work enable or restrain the use of ‘high-impact pedagogical practices’ on our campuses. There is nothing more important to the educational mission of our institutions than a clear understanding of the relation of faculty work to assessable student learning outcomes. We agree with the proposition that “campuses must create occasions where people can (yes) engage with the assessment data and with one another, and ask what this or that new finding tells them about what to do in their own setting” (NSSE Annual Report 2008). Our previous project on value-added assessment demonstrates that we have the will and resources to use assessment to improve our academic programs and have in place a clearly defined leadership structure and core of ‘apostle’ participants on each campus responsible for advancing this work.

Timeline for a four-year study

Year One

- Broad reading in successful pedagogical practices by lead participants (‘apostles’)
- Forum on each campus to discuss faculty work and broaden the conversation
- Conference for discussion of the use of ‘high-impact’ practices and their relation to faculty work for participants from all seven campuses

Year Two

- Design a variety of pilot learning experiences in year two
- Develop and maintain a consortium website for posting successful practices and supporting dialogue among ‘apostles’ and to widen the conversations on and between campuses
- Cultivate faculty on each campus who will articulate the potential value of these models of faculty work
- Our institutional research offices would analyze our NSSE data to measure student perceptions of faculty allocation of their work to the types of interactions with students that we are pilot testing and in the traditional classes
- Conference for discussion of progress and plans for implementation of pilot experiences

Year Three

- Incorporate these pilot experiences and measures of student learning and faculty work into the teaching responsibilities of participant faculty
- Mature the website as a tool to advance the project and increase the communication within the consortium

Year Four

- We would offer a second phase of these pilots across our campuses and assess their effect on student learning, evaluate appropriate measures of faculty work and begin to consider the implications for faculty development alike. Share preliminary results at a national conference.
- Institutional research offices complete the analysis of outcomes measures. Write and publish our results beyond our consortium.
- Open the mature website outside the consortium

Budget Proposal

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	TOTAL
Planning travel ¹	700	700	700	1100	3200
Lead Faculty Stipend ²	4000	4000	4000		12,000
Lead Faculty travel ³	1600	1600			3200
Consultants ⁴	2000	1000			3000

Teagle Proposal

Total per institution	8,300	7,300	4,700	1,100	21,400
TOTAL REQUEST	58,100	51,100	32,900	7,700	149,800

Costs to be borne by each institution

Dean's travel	1000	1000	1000	1000	4000
Consultants' travel	500	500			1000
Hosting costs ⁵	1000	1000		1000	3000
IR travel	800	800			1600
Administrative	700	700	700	700	2800
Institutional TOTAL	4,000	4,000	1,700	2,700	12,400

¹ Travel for a representative group for planning purposes each summer and report writing the final year.

² For most campuses, this will mean a \$2000 stipend per year x 2 faculty x 3 years = \$12,000

³ 800 travel/lodging/meals x 2 faculty x 2 years = \$3200

⁴ Will fund consultants at 2 summer meetings as well as a consultant to work with individual campuses.

⁵ Each campus will co-host at least one meeting; date will vary.