

Reforming Undergraduate Education: Lessons from Institutions that Improved Student Engagement

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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 engagement
 - Demonstrate and improve overall educational quality



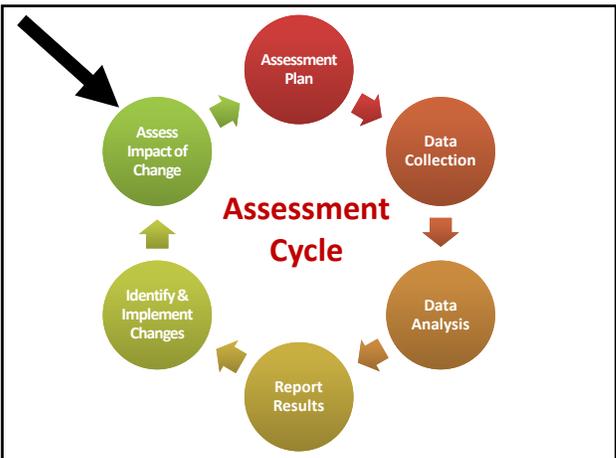
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Assessment Challenge

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.



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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).

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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?



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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?*

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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 Spencer Foundation Funded

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

	AC	ACL	SFc	SCE	Deep HIOrd	Deep Integ	High-Imp	Diversity
First-year (532)	↑53	↑147	↑109	↑57	↑55	↑50	↑20	↑55
Senior (533)	↑41	↑116	↑91	↑96	↑36	↑29	↑26	↑34

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

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	↓7	↓2	↓1	↓4	↓0	↓2	↓8	↓9
Senior (533)	↑41	↑116	↑91	↑96	↑36	↑29	↑26	↑34
	↓6	↓5	↓3	↓10	↓4	↓4	↓3	↓5

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).

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Are Institutions Improving?

Yes.

Systematic improvement efforts have paid off.



University of Texas-San Antonio

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)**

nsse.iub.edu/NSSE_2009_Results/index.cfm

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



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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?



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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.



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What Accounts for Change in Scores at Institutions?



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Intentional Reform?

What proportion of the 64 institutions reported that they had implemented change efforts that contributed to improved results?

- a) almost all b) 2/3 c) about half d) a third
- a) All but 4 institutions said **“Yes”** they had implemented change efforts that they believe account for results....>>> **3 unsure, 1 no**

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Motivation for Change

- What is motivating change on your campus?
- What has been most influential?



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Motivation for Change

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

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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



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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)

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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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What Are We Learning from Site Visits?



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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



The Teagle Foundation



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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

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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



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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

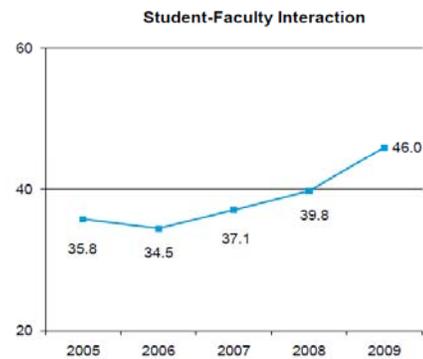
FYE components:

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

www.southernct.edu/academics/academicaffairs/assess/

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First-year Trend Example



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Data-Informed Change

- Genuine curiosity about educational quality – Ask: “What if? Why? and How?” a lot.
- 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)

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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**



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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.**



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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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“Learning to Improve” Project

