

## Making Change in the First College Year: Lessons from Institutions that Improved Student Engagement

25<sup>th</sup> International First Year Experience Conference 2012



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## Reforming Undergraduate Education

### • Pressure to reform to...

- Improve student success
- Increase experiences needed for 21<sup>st</sup> century economy
- Ensure institution has conditions in place to maximize student learning
- Demonstrate and improve overall educational quality



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## 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

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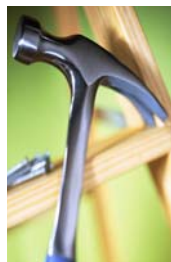
## Literature on Institutional Change

- 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 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?



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**Change is Hard.  
Yet, Some Institutions Are  
Doing It!!!**

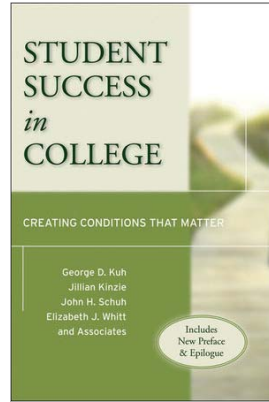


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## Project DEEP:

A study of High-Performing Institutions

What do educationally effective institutions do to foster student engagement and success?



## Six Shared Conditions of Educationally Effective Institutions

1. “Living” Mission and “Lived” Educational Philosophy
2. Unshakeable Focus on Student Learning
3. Environments Adapted for Educational Enrichment
4. Clearly Marked Pathways to Student Success
5. Improvement-Oriented Ethos
6. Shared Responsibility for Educational Quality

## 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.

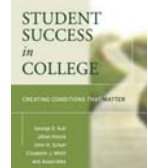
(from *Student Success in College*, 2010)

## 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*

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## NSSE Opportunity to Study Improvement

- **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?



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

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## 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



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## Number of Measures That Improved

Measure	FY	SR
1. Active & Collaborative Learning	147	116
2. Student-Faculty Interaction	109	91
3. Supportive Campus Environment	57	96
4. Higher Order Learning	55	36
5. Diversity Experiences	55	34
6. Academic Challenge	53	41
7. Integrative Learning	50	29
8. High-Impact Practices	20	26

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## Number of Measures That Declined

Measure	FY	SR
1. Active & Collaborative Learning	2	5
2. Student-Faculty Interaction	1	3
3. Supportive Campus Environment	4	10
4. Higher Order Learning	0	4
5. Diversity Experiences	9	5
6. Academic Challenge	7	6
7. Integrative Learning	2	4
8. High-Impact Practices	8	3

## 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**

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## Are Institutions Improving?

# Yes.

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



University of Texas-San Antonio

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## To Ponder

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



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## 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

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## 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?



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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



- 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)

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## 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

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## 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

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## Type of Change: First Year Focus

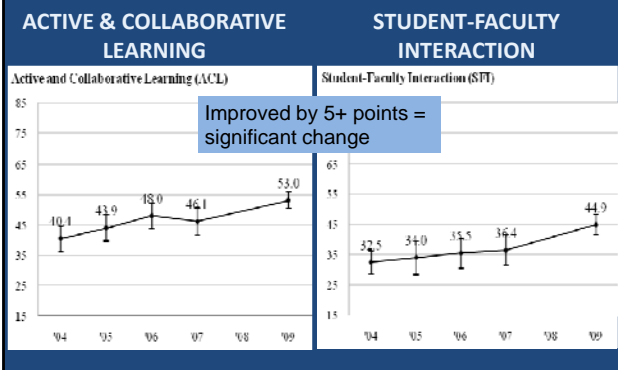


- Enhanced student tutor program to support student success
- Faculty emphasize active and collaborative learning experiences in classes
- New student success center



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## Results Over Time – First-Year Student at TAMIU





## 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**

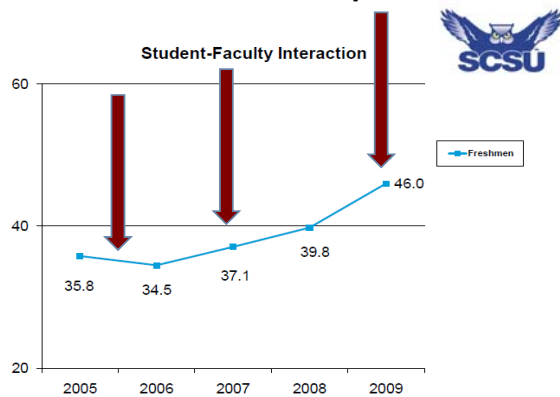
### FYE components:

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

[www.southernct.edu/academics/academicaffairs/assess/](http://www.southernct.edu/academics/academicaffairs/assess/)

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## First-Trend Example



## 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

## 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



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## 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)



## 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



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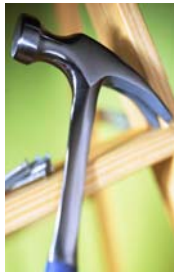
## Robust Partnerships Between Student & Academic Affairs

- 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?



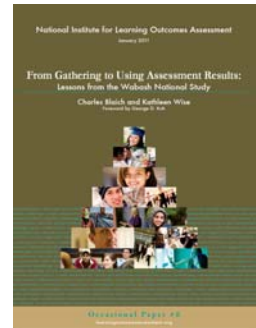
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## Wabash National Study: Assessment

Center of **Inquiry**  
WABASH COLLEGE

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](http://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.



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## Discussion and Comments

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“Learning to Improve” Project

