A Look at the Spellings Report Ten Years Later
Toward an Improvement Paradigm for Academic Quality
The VALUE of Learning: Meaningful Assessment on the Rise
Justice and Identity in the Twenty-First Century
A Tool for Administrators Who Support High-Impact Practices
Transforming a Core Curriculum
Gardening as Curricular Reform
Over the past ten years, higher education faculty and institutions have begun to meet the challenge of accountability by placing faculty and educator expertise and judgment at the center of assessment efforts that have student learning improvement as their primary purpose.

—Terrel Rhodes
From 1818 R Street NW

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The American Dream and Higher Education’s Broader Purpose

In *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*, humorist and novelist Mark Twain quips, “Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education.” Twain was masterful at using irony to both reflect populist sentiments and critique the politics of the day. At a time when Americans were searching for a national identity, Twain’s popularity soared as he used the language of the people to deliver satirical messages aimed at undermining social hierarchies steeped in artificiality, pretentiousness, and inflated sophistication.

Americans today seem to be engaged in a similar identity crisis, accompanied by a nostalgic quest to recapture the American Dream. Coined by writer James Truslow Adams in 1931, the original concept of the “American Dream” was grounded in an idealist vision “of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.” While the American Dream has taken a decidedly more materialistic turn in recent years, higher education has consistently been ideologically linked to its fulfillment, whether in its capacity to serve as a catalyst for economic success and social mobility, in its ability to convey the values upon which our society rests, or in its preservation of democratic vitality through an educated citizenry.

What, then, are we to make of a recent Kaiser Family Foundation and CNN poll conducted of “working-class whites,” defined as “white Americans without college degrees,” in which 51 percent said that their lives would be no different in response to the question, “Do you think your life would be better, worse, or no different if you had a four-year college degree?” Standing in stark contrast to “working-class blacks” and “working-class Hispanics,” for whom the perceived correlation was much stronger (with 73 percent of African Americans and 74 percent of Hispanics maintaining that a four-year college degree would make their lives better), many white working-class Americans remain skeptical with respect to whether a college degree will enable them to achieve the hallmark of the dream—doing better than one’s parents. This is the case despite research indicating that Americans with a four-year college degree out-earn their peers by 98 percent.

Scholars of white working-class studies offer powerful insights into the mindset of those who reject higher education at the ostensible expense of their own best interest. Among these is Sherry Linkon from Georgetown University, who was a commentator the day before the presidential election on *The Academic Minute*, a public radio show I host. Linkon reminded listeners that the costs of deindustrialization have not only been straightforwardly economic, noting the sometimes hidden long-term benefits industrial work provided, such as allowing “workers to buy homes, send their children to college, develop work-based social networks, and enjoy stable family and community lives.” Comparing the toxic effects of deindustrialization to those of radioactive waste, she insists that “if we want to understand the half-life of deindustrialization, we should listen to the stories of those who still feel the loss of economic security but also of social networks and individual possibility.” Likewise Michelle Tokarczyk, a professor of white
working-class studies at Goucher College, provides a lens for understanding the disillusionment with higher education as an essential component of the American Dream. For Tokarczyk, the cynicism can be traced back to the white working-class’s “economic anxieties and political resentments, but also their cultural fears, including their concerns about the costs of elusive upward mobility.”

The articles in this issue of *Liberal Education* attempt to provide a blueprint for change in response and reaction to the stories of those who have been denied access or been thwarted by institutional structures that create barriers to success. They confront the challenge of how to demonstrate that colleges and universities are teaching students twenty-first-century skills and truly preparing them for work and life, offer resources for implementing high-impact practices, raise critical questions regarding the hidden costs of “preferred identities” on our campuses, tackle curricular reform while enhancing signature work, and discuss strategies for overcoming burnout through co-teaching. Most significantly, they do so in relation to the broader purpose of higher education.

That broader purpose of a college or university education extends beyond its market value. As philosopher Mark Kingwell points out, “When it comes to valuing education, no ratings system or outcomes table can actually penetrate the mystery of why learning is good.” For Kingwell, the best single candidate for capturing higher education’s true value is the sense of irony employed by commentators like Twain. Kingwell says, “Ironic of this kind is the opposite of ideology, that bastion of catastrophic fixed meanings. As such, it is a virtue of the democratic imagination, an invitation to think differently, opt out, depart from imposed narratives, be a happiness delinquent.” Like Twain, who was always quick to point out incongruities between words and actions, Kingwell concludes, “And that’s what education is for, finally. Ironically, you can pay for the opportunity but you can’t put a price on the outcome.”—LYNN PASQUERELLA

**Notes**

It has been just over a decade since the Commission on the Future of Higher Education appointed by the then secretary of education Margaret Spellings issued its report, calling for greater accountability and recommending an outcomes-based approach allied with a consumerist vision of postsecondary education. Released in the context of mounting concerns about the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on K-12 education, and widely viewed as potentially presaging an NCLB-style incursion into higher education, the report marked a key moment in the ongoing assessment movement.

As Russell Neuman observes in this issue, “blue ribbon panels rarely say much that is new or stimulate much sustained attention, but the Spellings report seemed to strike a chord and did a bit of both.” Ten years on from the release of the report of the Spelling Commission, what have been its lasting effects on the assessment movement? In the first of three stock-taking articles, Neuman takes up this question, revisiting the report’s key themes and recommendations in light of subsequent developments.

In the second article, Douglas Roscoe also uses the occasion of the ten-year anniversary of the Spellings report to reflect on the direction of the assessment movement, arguing that “the time is right for a reassessment.” The current assessment paradigm, he concludes, has led to the ossification of certain practices that ought to be either reconsidered or abandoned altogether. Drawing on extensive experience in assessment, Roscoe proposes a new paradigm that would displace the primacy of evidence and data and refocus efforts more directly on the improvement of teaching and learning.

Within the context set by Neuman and Roscoe, the third article takes stock of AAC&U’s own work on assessment. There, Terrel Rhodes points out that the association “has for decades been engaged simultaneously with assessment for learning improvement and assessment for accountability, viewing these two strands as intertwined by necessity and practice.” He reviews the development of AAC&U’s distinctive VALUE approach, which includes the rubric-based assessment of authentic student work and has “helped facilitate the transformation of assessment into a high-impact practice.” Rhodes also describes an important initiative currently underway to explore whether and how the VALUE approach to assessing student learning outcomes can be brought to scale across higher education.

In Our Students’ Best Work: A Framework for Accountability Worthy of Our Mission, a statement first issued in 2004, the AAC&U Board of Directors observes that, “despite the development over the past three decades of a veritable ‘assessment movement,’ too many institutions and programs still are unable to answer legitimate questions about what their students are learning in college. Both the aims and the outcomes of college have remained unclear.” Does this still remain the case today, more than a decade after the release of the Spellings report and more than a dozen years after the AAC&U Board urged educational leaders to “embrace a set of highly valued and widely affirmed educational goals, establish high standards for each, and assess their achievement across the curriculum”? By examining the current state of the assessment movement and reviewing both its successes and its shortcomings, the articles featured in this issue offer a response to this question. They also offer suggestions for where the movement might most productively go from here.—DAVID TRITELLI
New Online Resource for Community Colleges
As part of its Advancing Roadmaps for Community College Leadership to Improve Student Learning and Success initiative, AAC&U has launched a new online resource hub and virtual community of practice for community colleges. Called the LEAP Connections Resource Hub, this new website provides access to information, templates, campus models, research, online dialogues, and webinars designed to facilitate the scaling of evidence-based practices that support educational quality and student success. The site is designed for community college faculty as well as other educators, academic administrators, and student affairs professionals.

To visit the LEAP Connections Resource Hub, go to http://leapconnections.aacu.org. More information about the Roadmaps initiative is available online at www.aacu.org/advancingroadmaps.

New LEAP Global Partnership
AAC&U has formed a new partnership with the Asian Cooperative Program (ACP), a consortium of fourteen Southeast Asian universities and Kansai University of International Studies in Japan. The ACP is a collaborative effort to share portions of general education across the partner institutions. The shared elements emphasize regional safety and security, seeking to improve the quality of education about serious regional problems. ACP member institutions collaborate to improve and develop general education core curricula, overseas programs, assessment of learning outcomes, and global research. The ACP plans to use AAC&U resources, including the VALUE rubrics, to improve the quality of general education and assessment. More information about LEAP global partners is available online at http://www.aacu.org/leap/global-partners.

AAC&U Members Participate in Active Learning Day
On October 25, 2016, over four hundred STEM faculty and administrators took part in Active Learning Day. Led by AAC&U and its Project Kaleidoscope, participants spent the day implementing active teaching and learning strategies, identifying innovative ways to deepen and extend institutional commitments to active teaching and learning, sharing best practices with colleagues, and producing videos of active teaching strategies in practice. Participants also pledged to support the kinds of active teaching and learning strategies in STEM classrooms that are culturally responsive to today’s undergraduate population.

Active Learning Day was organized by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy as part of its nationwide call to action to improve education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Videos created by participants to showcase their participation are available online at http://stem-central.net.

Upcoming Meetings
- March 16–18, 2017
  Diversity, Learning, and Student Success
  Jacksonville, Florida
- May 31–June 3, 2017
  Institute on General Education and Assessment
  Loyola University Chicago
  Chicago, Illinois
- June 24–June 27, 2017
  Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success
  Boston University
- July 11–14, 2017
  Institute on Integrative Learning and Signature Work
  Loyola University Chicago
  Chicago, Illinois
- July 11–30, 2017
  PKAL STEM Leadership Institutes
  Adamstown, Maryland

AAC&U MEMBERSHIP 2017
1,406 members

www.aacu.org
Charting the Future of US Higher Education
A Look at the Spellings Report Ten Years Later

SEPTEMBER MARKED THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY of the release of A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of US Higher Education, the report of the Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education, also known as the Spellings Commission. Blue ribbon panels rarely say much that is new or stimulate much sustained attention, but the Spellings report seemed to strike a chord and did a bit of both. In 2009, Stanford educational psychologist Richard Shavelson observed that the commission had spurred debate and prompted a variety of new initiatives to assess undergraduates’ learning and to “hold higher education accountable.”

The report’s central theme, on target then and perhaps even more significant now, proclaims that “to meet the challenges of the 21st century, higher education must change from a system primarily based on reputation to one based on performance.”

The frustratingly difficult challenge, fully acknowledged by the commission at the time, is how to define and assess performance. What is it that four years of college-level study is designed to accomplish?

The two predominant, if awkwardly discrete, answers to this question reflect the views of two sets of interested parties. The answer provided by students (and perhaps even more so by their parents) is “to get a good job”—an unambiguous bottom line and an outcome that is actually subject to calculations of return on investment. Members of the professoriate, who are more than a little ambivalent about a role as occupational placement specialists, have a different answer. The purpose of college in their view is to develop the student’s capacity for critical thinking, abstract analysis, and complex problem solving. This is why it does not particularly matter whether you have selected English literature or biology; if you do well, you can still get that good job at Google because you are a critical thinker.

Accordingly, there have been two important lines of activity and research in the wake of the Spellings Commission—one studying the articulation between college and successful, well-compensated careers, and the other taking a serious look at what critical thinking actually is and what in the college experience might facilitate it.

College and successful careers
One of the commission’s most specific recommendations was the creation of “a consumer-friendly information database on higher education with useful, reliable information on institutions, coupled with a search engine to enable students, parents, policymakers and others to weigh and rank comparative institutional performance.” Although some members of the commission were hopeful that a sophisticated assessment of the “value added” of a college education could be developed, many in the higher education community were highly and vocally skeptical. They argued, first, that one-size-fits-all testing could not possibly capture the diversity of institutions and curricula that are found in American higher education and, second, that the federal government is not the appropriate entity to direct the assessment of learning.
outcomes. As a result of this resistance, the following language was inserted in the relevant section of the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act: “Nothing in this section shall be construed to permit the Secretary to establish any criteria that specifies, defines, or prescribes the standards that accrediting agencies or associations shall use to assess any institution’s success with respect to student achievement.”

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and commission cochair Charles Miller felt the key to getting better data on students, many of whom attended multiple institutions over time, was the development of a presumptively anonymous unit record system that could be used to track education and employment. That turned out to be a nonstarter, however, because of privacy concerns. David Warren of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, for example, protested that “although the commission report calls for ‘non-identifiable’ data, this is inconsistent with the commission’s desire to collect data on transfer students, and to track labor-force outcomes. Finding effective ways to track the progress of individuals, without having their identities known in some originating database, seems to us to be impossible. We also fear that the existence of such a massive registry will prove irresistible to future demands for ancillary uses of the data, and for additions to the data for non-educational purposes.”

In an attempt to preempt a federal system for evaluating educational outcomes, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities created the Voluntary System of Accountability, whose College Portrait website enables comparisons among participating public universities based on a variety of metrics, including class size, campus safety, tuition, student satisfaction, and learning outcomes. Many public institutions opted not to participate, however, and private higher education was not included in the process.

The Obama administration picked up the ball in 2013, creating the interactive College Scorecard, which “provides students and families the critical information they need to make smart decisions about where to enroll for higher education.” The Department of Education described this as part of President Obama’s broader effort to hold colleges accountable for cost, value, and quality. Ironically, because of the statutory prohibitions on assessing learning outcomes—and, of course, the immense difficulties of definition and measurement—the scorecard is built around just three fully quantitative measures: tuition, graduation rates, and the average income of graduates. Parents and prospective students can use the scorecard to calculate a crude return on investment by comparing tuition and postgraduation salaries.

The scorecard raises the fundamental question: Is college really worth it? Given the prominence of billionaire college dropouts Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg and fellow billionaire Peter Thiel’s fellowship initiative, which annually awards $100,000 to twenty people under twenty years old in order to spur them to drop out of college and create their own ventures, the question is a serious one. Economists have been crunching the numbers on this question for years. Most commonly reported is an annualized return on investment of 10 percent, which makes completion of a four-year college degree pretty attractive. There is a lot of individual variation, of course, and there are numerous anecdotes about Princeton history majors flipping burgers. A recent report in Science concludes that the earnings gap between college and high school graduates has more than doubled in the United States over the past three decades and is now reaching a lifetime differential of about half a million dollars, including adjustments for tuition, inflation, and foregone income while attending school. Although student debt remains a significant problem, the average debt of about $29,000 doesn’t look quite so intimidating.

While it may be understandable that prospective students and their parents are interested in return on investment, the average salary of college graduates is a very crude and partial index of what an undergraduate education is designed to accomplish.

**College and learning outcomes**

There is clearly something of a student assessment movement afoot. Experienced observers note wryly that the impulse to try to assess college learning outcomes waxes and wanes with the rhythm of the hand-wringing of blue ribbon commissions, the public perception of tuition and student debt crises, and various announcements of critical shortages of highly skilled workers. Before the release of the Spellings
report, the outcomes-assessment frenzy was driven, in part, by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s comparisons of national higher education systems—comparisons in which the United States appeared somewhere in the undistinguished middle of the pack on most measures. Moreover, as European college students were actively moving around the European Union and transferring credits, the so-called Bologna Process led to a variety of creative assessment initiatives and credit-hour evaluations. This process was imported to the United States by Lumina Foundation, which encourages disciplinary “tuning” and created a “degree qualifications profile” that identifies high-level intellectual skills.9

Because of the broad resistance to the Spellings Commission’s call for direct federal engagement in the assessment of higher education outcomes, the Bush administration and, later, the Obama administration turned to a Plan B: working through the existing six primary regional higher education accreditation entities to tie the renewal of accreditation every five years to serious efforts on the part of colleges and universities under review to create and utilize meaningful learning outcomes measures. The idea is that the faculty and administration of these institutions know the local conditions best and can most appropriately tailor the process—self-assessment to preempt federal assessment. This is certainly politically viable, but it is not clear that the incentives are in place for much more than various forms of symbolic compliance.

An actual failure of an institution to be reaccredited is extraordinarily rare, so the positive effects of the process tend to be indirect. The players in this process are hardworking and earnest, and from time to time study groups of faculty and administrators do get excited about the potential of the assessment process to produce real reform. But it is relatively rare that the meetings, PowerPoint presentations, and five-year plans full of student learning outcomes actually make a difference in the typical classroom. Historians note that institutions of higher education over the last one thousand years have been almost unique in their capacity to resist change—a phenomenon well captured by the quip that it is easier to move a graveyard than to change a college curriculum.

Nonetheless, there are signs that meaningful structural reform may be underway. This is due not to a single historical impetus, but rather to a confluence of forces. During the last decade, because of extreme economic pressures on state-level support for higher education, state schools lost 30–45 percent of their state funding.
Further, as a result of the fact that 70 percent of college costs are staff related, the usual increased efficiencies from technological advances are not in evidence. The result is that, controlling for inflation, tuition has risen over the last decade by 25 percent for private, nonprofit institutions and by 34 percent for public institutions. It is unrealistic to imagine that these growth rates can continue.

Is it actually possible to meaningfully assess intellectual skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving? Although many have expressed skepticism over the years, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) initiative, which was already well underway when the Spellings Commission was convened and was approvingly acknowledged in the final report, has turned out to be a key development. The CLA indirectly acknowledges that the facts and figures remembered from a college classroom—the sorts of things captured by multiple-choice tests—may help you on Jeopardy but are unlikely to be of much direct use in a professional career.

The advantage gained from college is, presumably, the ability to critically evaluate and make sense of new information and new situations. The CLA exercises address this directly by assessing written communication skills in response to performance tasks derived from a domain of real-world, on-the-job decision making. Test-takers are confronted with a critical situation, often involving conflicting indicators, and are required to evaluate pros and cons, make a recommendation, and successfully articulate their reasoning. The test is conducted entirely online, with responses scored by machine or by a trained cadre of readers who grade the answers online.

Although the CLA has its critics, the fact that it exists and is widely used represents an important development in the culture of higher education and signals a new seriousness about evaluation and outcomes. That’s the good news. The not-so-good news is that a major study of CLA results found that only 45 percent of the students “did not demonstrate any statistically significant improvement in CLA performance during the first two years of college,” and that 36 percent “did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning” over four years of college. And when in evidence, the improvements were statistically modest.

Many observers were not terribly surprised by these findings and agreed with the authors’ conclusions that too few college courses assign much reading or require much writing, and that too many undergraduates drift through college without a clear sense of purpose or an appreciation of how their classwork may ultimately relate to professional achievement. If this is largely true, then perhaps we should not blame the students but rather the professoriate, which views the world through the lens of
disciplinary specialization. The faculty member who takes student careers or even a holistic view of critical thinking seriously is a rarity. If careers and critical thinking are the keys to collegiate performance, then we have a challenge in moving from a system primarily based on reputation to one based on performance.

Ten years after the release of the Spellings report, American higher education has made demonstrable progress in taking its performance more seriously. One would be hard pressed to argue that this was a direct result of the commission’s report; it seems to result from a shift in the zeitgeist, albeit a very gradual one. In the world of accreditation and, increasingly, in higher education administration, the message has been received and understood. In the world of the teaching faculty? Not so much.

A more dramatic change in higher education may require an external shock like the Sputnik crisis of the 1950s. The advent of the MOOC and the growth of for-profit higher education have not had much of an effect on educational practice in traditional public and private higher education. The perception of a crisis in student debt has potential. But by their nature, financial dynamics move slowly. As a result, in the absence of some sort of sudden student debt meltdown, a crisis mentality is unlikely to take hold. So we are likely to witness a much more measured rate of change.

The next ten years
If the spirit of the Spellings Commission’s call for a focus on performance rather than reputation in higher education has resonated at all in
the last decade, it has been at the institutional level. Concerns about university budgets and tuition increases, about accreditation and the clarification of educational objectives and assessment of learning outcomes, seldom make themselves felt in classrooms and faculty offices.

Faculty skepticism makes sense. Assessment may well be seen as simply asking for trouble, and there are no obvious incentives for faculty members to pursue such experimentation with much energy. For many faculty, “assessment” probably resonates with the curious phenomenon of student evaluation questionnaires. There is little evidence that a student’s “liking” a course is correlated with demonstrable progress on learning outcomes. Indeed, there may well be an inverse correlation between the difficulty and time demands of a course and student satisfaction. And it is well known that “easy A’s” often correlate with customer satisfaction.

There is a further complication. To the extent that evidence of successful teaching is valued and rewarded, the process takes place largely within each academic department. As a result, evaluation is conducted using the specialized lens of expertise esteemed in particular disciplines, rather than elusive and broadly defined questions of critical thinking or intellectual integration.

So if the next ten years are to distinguish themselves from the last ten, especially concerning faculty engagement, we are going to need a deus ex machina or some sort of environmental intervention to shift the direction of this narrative arc. Any candidates?

Well it turns out that there is a candidate. It is the machina after all (this time minus the deus), a dramatic growth in attention to instructional technology. Some of the changing technical environment is primarily mechanical—the video projector replaces the blackboard, the MacBook replaces the notebook, the physical library is supplemented by variety of resources accessible to students online. But it gets especially interesting when we examine the wake of the MOOC phenomenon.

MOOC is the infelicitous acronym for “massive open online course.” Free or relatively inexpensive online education based on video lectures, online readings, and interactive exercises and exams from a variety of sources has become an important enrichment of the environment of higher education. MOOCs, however, have not put traditional higher education out of business, as some were speculating when MOOCs came into popular focus in 2012. But it would be a mistake to dismiss the online hubbub as just a passing fashion. Perhaps more important than the MOOC itself is what might be termed “the wake of the MOOC.”

How can the techniques of the MOOC be used to enrich and extend the reach of traditional education and, importantly, to reduce the seemingly intransigent and challenging costs of providing quality higher education? Enter the flipped course, blended learning, and hybrid instruction through which a traditional faculty member moves the lectures, readings, and some exercises online in order to leave face-to-face classroom time for interactive problem solving, group work, and in-depth analysis and synthesis.
When faculty members begin to explore the use of technology to enhance their classes, something important and largely unexpected occurs. Some viewing at a distance may assume going digital involves a simple process of lecture capture and the digitization of course packs. But it turns out that lecture capture almost never works well. That in itself tells us something. A video of the traditional blackboard-based lecture with the instructor’s back to the camera or a PowerPoint-based lecture with an instructor reading through the slides without the prospect of actual instructor-student interaction is stunningly dull and enervating. YouTube and some ill-conceived MOOCs provide ample evidence of this. It quickly becomes clear that flipping and blending require the instructor to rethink both the learning objectives and the appropriate means to those objectives.

There is a scenario that plays out again and again as a faculty member sits down for the first time with an instructional technology specialist and asks, in effect, “How do I do this?” The response is not a list of available technical tools, but rather another question: “What are your educational objectives?” How best to design online readings, video lessons, online student discussions, and interactive modules depends critically on the nature of the intellectual material to be conveyed.

It is something of a magic moment, or at least it can be under the right circumstances. What at first might seem like a routine technical question, such as whether to use a laser pointer, turns out to be nothing of the sort. It is more like translating prose or poetry from one language to another, which requires fluency and artistry in both languages. Flipping and blending require rethinking pedagogical fundamentals. The fact that thoughtless lecture capture is a non-starter quickly becomes clear to faculty member and student alike.

What is largely missing from the scenario, so far at least, is a recognition that moving online offers dramatic new possibilities for assessment. As each student moves through the instructional materials, they leave digital footprints. This allows for adaptive strategies to cycle those students who are struggling with the material to get additional help. It allows students to choose the instructional format of particular materials that best meets their learning styles.

Some face-to-face lecturers hand out three-by-five cards for an every-student-response exercise. Others experiment with wireless hand-held clickers for student responses. Online, the opportunity for an every-student response is not only continuous and ongoing, it is essential for successful pedagogical design.

Experimentation with digitally enhanced teaching in higher education will likely move slowly and unevenly among different institutions. But the potential for engaging faculty in the assessment of student learning outcomes should not be overlooked. It will require that presidents, deans, department chairs, and faculty themselves engage in, well, some critical thinking.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

NOTES
3. Ibid.
DOUGLAS D. ROSCOE

Toward an Improvement Paradigm for Academic Quality

The assessment movement that has emerged on American college campuses over the last twenty years emphasizes the need to carefully articulate the particular outcomes we seek for our students, and it demands that faculty and administrators provide evidence of their students’ success with respect to these outcomes. It also requires that this evidence be used to improve the educational experience of students in order to better meet those outcomes.

The transformation of the original assessment movement into paradigmatic status has largely been driven by the accreditation process. The regional accrediting bodies, perhaps reasonably concerned about heading off government-mandated standards and testing, now expect institutions to engage in student learning assessment at all program levels, from campus-wide general education down to majors and minors.

This paradigm, like all paradigms, has closed off questioning of key assumptions and has facilitated the ossification of certain practices that may no longer serve us well. My view is that we should consider breaking apart this paradigm by moving away from a focus on assessment and toward an emphasis on improvement. This shift will retain what was valuable in the assessment movement while paring away some of the dysfunctions that have arisen as it has become paradigmatic.

Costs and benefits of the assessment paradigm

I have been deeply involved in this assessment paradigm from the beginning of my career over fifteen years ago. As a new assistant professor with skills in survey research and social science methodology, I was recruited to be my department’s director of assessment, even before I fully understood the significance of the assessment movement (or the faculty’s reluctance to embrace it). Since then I’ve directed departmental assessment every year, across two universities; sat on a college-level committee that reviews program assessment; directed the assessment of my university’s general education program since 2008; and even worked on general education assessment as a Fulbright Scholar in Hong Kong in 2011. I have implemented a variety of assessments, including off-the-shelf standardized tests, homegrown standardized tests, rubric-scored student writing, curricular mapping, focus groups, and more. During all this activity, I have come to the conclusion that the assessment paradigm provides a distinctive benefit to our students.

It also generates a number of costs.

Unfortunately, the assessment paradigm tends to assume the benefits and ignore the costs. This has created a number of dysfunctions in the ways we attempt to improve higher education. And let’s be clear: improvement is the point. Assessment should be about changing what happens in the classroom—what students

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The dysfunctionality of assessment today starts with the primacy of evidence and data. One of the key premises of the assessment paradigm is that the faculty's conventional wisdom about what students can and cannot do well is unreliable. We therefore must collect direct evidence of students' abilities to master the outcomes that we define to be part of their educational process. As someone whose own political science research is primarily quantitative, I am entirely sympathetic with this premise. But good data must be available to answer our questions about student learning successfully.

Even if you do get a representative sample of students' best work from a high-quality test, it often gives you great answers to the wrong questions. The problem is that assessment data can be either cheap or good, but are rarely both. The fact is that good evidence about student learning is costly. For example, valid and reliable standardized tests are not easy to produce, and without a large staff to create one in-house, institutions have to buy one created by an educational corporation. Undergraduate Major Field Tests from the Educational Testing Service cost about $25 per student tested. The Collegiate Learning Assessment by the Council for Aid to Education runs about $35. Multiply that by the number of students necessary to get a reasonably representative sample, add the costs of paying staff to procure and administer the test, and we're talking about a fairly significant cost.

Standardized tests have their limitations in terms of what they can tell you about student learning, and most don't match up very well to the particular learning outcomes we have defined for our students. As anyone who has administered standardized assessments will tell you, it is a battle to get students to take them (unless required in a course) and then another challenge to get students to take them seriously. This tends to introduce serious sampling biases and validity problems with the resulting measures. And even if you do get a representative sample of students' best work from a high-quality test, it often gives you great answers to the wrong questions. Institutions define their own learning outcomes, and standardized tests rarely match up perfectly.

Consequently, many institutions have turned to rubric-scoring of authentic student work. That is, student work produced for credit in classes is collected, and readers determine how well each student performs on a number of criteria connected to the defined learning outcomes. This has the advantage of capturing students trying to do their best and mapping their work directly onto the key outcomes. Unfortunately, creating good data from a rubric-scoring process is very difficult—and the availability of substantial resources makes it only slightly less so. The main problem is that scoring is a necessarily subjective process that requires all kinds of judgments about what key terms mean, how to distinguish between performance categories, and how to sort students' work into those categories. Calibration sessions that give readers training can be helpful, at least in promoting greater reliability, but may not help in establishing validity (e.g., everyone agrees what a "proficient" response looks like for scoring purposes, but is a student who wrote it really and truly proficient?). Moreover, it is often difficult to determine whether a student is unable to show mastery of an outcome or whether an assignment just didn't do enough to prompt the student to show that mastery. All these issues are complicated in general education curricula, where student work is coming from a variety of disciplines using an assortment of assignments that may not be commensurate.

Of course, content analysis methodology is used in social science research all the time, and there are ways to improve, if perhaps not perfect, these measurements. But these are costly. For example, double- or triple-coding helps, but now two or three times as many readers have to sacrifice the time (presumably at the expense of their other teaching, scholarship, and service obligations) or, for institutions that can afford it, stipends or course releases now go to that many more faculty. And as these projects get bigger and more complicated, the assessment paradigm has justified the creation and expansion of assessment administration offices. To do these kinds of assessments properly and produce high-quality data, it is probably necessary to hire staff with expertise in the methodology who can design and implement the process. Campus-wide administrators hired mainly to be "assessment directors" were rare when I started my career; they no longer are.

As enrollments stagnate, state appropriations dwindle, and campus budgets get squeezed, the opportunity costs of this kind of high-cost,
high-quality assessment are sharply felt. Many faculty are reasonably upset when another assessment administrator is hired while a vacant line in their department remains unfilled. Given accreditors’ demands for assessment and the need to do more with fewer resources, campus leaders often have to choose between good assessment data or cheap assessment data. For a select few institutions, good data can be easily afforded. For most, it is a difficult cost to bear.

To make matters worse, even the best, most valid and reliable assessment data about student learning are often not really all that useful. At the same time, useful information that could improve practices is easily available without having to score or test our students separately.

To explain what I mean, consider a stylized example. Imagine a particular program has four defined learning outcomes. Student work is collected from a large random sample of students in the program, and readers score the work on each outcome. The resulting data need to be quantitatively summarized, given the number of cases. So averages might be calculated for each outcome, or the percentage scoring at or above a certain score is calculated. What do these numbers tell us? If the average on outcome one is 3.2 on a five-point scale, what does that mean? If 76 percent score at or above a 3, is that good or bad? Standardized tests create comparator benchmarks, at least, but rubric-scored work can’t be judged objectively like that. More importantly, while the numbers might be used to show external audiences what our students achieve, what does it suggest we do to improve student outcomes? What is the actionable information from these data?

We might identify the outcome with the worst scores and focus on improving it. But likely all outcomes could stand improvement, and even without any of the assessment data it would be possible to guess about the worst one and save the expense and hassle. And if we guessed wrong, the worst-case scenario is that we improve one outcome instead of another that needed it more. But we would still focus on improving an outcome, so it is not exactly a disaster.

Even if the assessment data can be used to narrow our focus for improvement, they don’t really tell us how to improve. To do that, we need...
other data that tell us about the educational experiences of the students. We need to know what classes students took, in what order, and what they did in their classes; we need to know what the assignments they completed were like and what the instructors did to support their learning; we need to know something about the individual students themselves, like their work habits, natural intelligence, attitudes about their education, and mental health. These data, correlated with student outcomes data, would show us what works and what should be more broadly implemented.

Fortunately, these kinds of correlational studies already exist and show us what improves student learning. If we want to improve our students’ ability to write or think critically, there is an enormous literature in the scholarship of teaching and learning to which we can turn. These are areas of scholarly expertise in their own right, and people devote their careers to careful measurement and to the testing of pedagogical research questions using sophisticated multivariate methodologies. Institutions do not need to create new data sets as part of an administratively imposed assessment process in order to get answers to our questions about how to teach our students better. Our faculty are already doing this work as part of their scholarship.

The reality is that the improvement piece of the assessment paradigm often takes a back seat to the collection of data. This manifests in the need for continual reminders to “close the loop”—that is, to use the data to change the educational experience of students.

In my experience, most of the value from assessment comes from closing the loop, but the data are useful mainly in that they provide the opportunity for faculty to have conversations about improvement. It is the requirement to discuss the data that provides an opening for fruitful dialogue about what is happening in our classes, what our students struggle with, what we are doing that works, and how we might change programs and courses to better steer our students toward the outcomes we are aiming them toward. It is remarkable how much improvement happens when faculty can carve out some time in their busy schedules just to talk about student success. The imperatives of scholarship and creative activity, teaching and grading, and service work leave little space on the plate for collective conversations about curricula and instruction. The assessment paradigm has been successful in demanding that these conversations take place on a regular basis.

To me, this has been the most important achievement of the assessment movement. The institutionalized collection of student outcomes data is really only a side note, only a part of the broader process—and a part that is far less important than it appears within the strictures of the paradigm. For this reason, I propose that we eliminate the assessment paradigm. In its place, we should embrace an improvement paradigm.
An improvement paradigm
What would an improvement paradigm look like? How would it differ from the current emphasis on assessment? What would be its tenets?

First, an improvement paradigm would place at the forefront collective conversations about curricula and instruction. Faculty often want to discuss teaching and curricula, but this simply gets pushed off the plate. An improvement paradigm would create spaces where these discussions are required; it would wall off an area on faculty plates crowded with scholarship, teaching, and service demands. Put differently, this is about institutionalizing regular, serious faculty conversations about curricula and instruction. The assessment process, when it functions well, can and does create these conversations—in fact, that is what’s most valuable about assessment today. But it would be better to put front and center the part of the process that is most worthwhile.

In practice, this would mean shifting what the campus administration and regional accreditors demand from faculty. Rather than requiring each department to identify an assessment guru who collects and analyzes data for the department, it would be far better to require regular department discussions about how to improve student learning. Deans might require a report of minutes from these meetings, rather than a report on what the assessment data showed. Indeed, the content of these conversations can be seen as the central product of the improvement paradigm (whereas in the
assessment paradigm, student learning data are the product, which then must be used by faculty to close the loop). Data can be important in showing faculty how our perceptions about student learning can be incorrect, but the data must be viewed as only one component of the faculty conversation about improvement.

Second, an improvement paradigm would emphasize front-end intentionality over back-end assessment. Improvement requires changing what we do in ways we expect will help. The focus of faculty efforts to boost academic quality should be on what we think we need to change in order to make improvements. This is not to say that student assessment data are irrelevant. We can learn important things about how to improve by looking at our students’ performance. But, as I noted earlier, intentional improvements can be driven just as successfully by professional research about teaching and learning. An improvement paradigm would ask faculty to rely on this research just as much as student learning data.

For example, the important work of George Kuh, using the National Survey of Student Engagement data, documents the powerful effect of the so-called high-impact practices on student outcomes.\(^1\) In an improvement paradigm, faculty might begin with this research, which already establishes the efficacy of these practices without any new campus assessment data, and ask how they might implement service learning or learning communities or any of the other high-impact practices. Front-end intentionality might also be captured in a curricular mapping process, which involves an analysis of which courses in a program are intended to contribute to particular learning outcomes. If a curricular map shows only a couple of courses that, say, work to improve information literacy skills, then improvement is likely to occur if instruction focused on that outcome is pushed into other courses.

Ultimately, there are two key questions.

What do we want our curriculum to do? What can we do to aim more squarely and effectively at those goals? Though this is a forward-looking perspective, it is also a reflective process. We can and should draw from what we have learned about students and their ability to master key learning outcomes—and there is a great diversity of information to draw upon.

This leads to the third key tenet of an improvement paradigm: a broadened view of what should be used to inform the improvement process. Collected data on student learning outcomes are fine, but they are far from the only useful input into a forward-looking improvement cycle and often have a low benefit-to-cost ratio. There are various alternatives that can be used: published research about instructional practices; curricular maps; surveys of instructional techniques and assignments; course and assignment grades (particularly if pieces of rubrics can be utilized); surveys of faculty opinions about student outcomes; focus groups; and, of course, faculty discussions about what our students struggle with and where they need help.

**Prospects for a paradigm shift**

Scientific paradigms usually arise for good reason, reflecting broad, useful, and accurate understandings of the world. Paradigm shifts occur because new information or theories promise even better ways of understanding. Similarly, the formation of the assessment paradigm was perfectly reasonable at the time. The 2006 report of the Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Education (also known as the Spellings report) raised concerns about academic quality in US higher education. The commission concluded that colleges and universities “must become more transparent about . . . student success outcomes, and must willingly share this information with students and families.” The report called for a focus on innovation, recommending that “America’s colleges and universities embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement” by developing “new pedagogies, curricula and technologies to improve learning.”\(^2\)

Following just four years after passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, which mandated state standards for primary and secondary education and standardized testing to assess student success in meeting those standards, the Spellings report sent shock waves through higher education. Would colleges and universities soon be mandated by the federal government to follow legislatively determined curricular standards and then to engage in high-stakes standardized testing to determine how well their students meet them? The prospect was scary for those who embrace the value of liberal education. It would be better, the thinking went, to get out
in front and begin demonstrating voluntarily how well higher education prepares graduates. Student outcomes assessment, already a growing movement among those interested in outcomes-based curricula, would become the key to these efforts. The focus on collecting outcomes data even eclipsed the Spellings report’s emphasis on innovation and improvement.

If it is not entirely accurate to say, a decade after the Spellings report, that the wind has gone out of the sails of standardized testing, it is fair to say the gale has softened to a mild, if consistent, breeze. There has been a considerable backlash against standardized testing in US schools, and the initial bipartisan support for No Child Left Behind has fractured on both sides of the aisle. Fights over standards and the pros and cons of testing are now more, not less, evident. Consensus has devolved into dissensus. A recent poll found that only 19 percent of Americans support the Common Core standards, with 54 percent admitting they do not know enough to have an opinion.

Almost two-thirds of Americans (64 percent) say there is too much emphasis on standardized testing in public schools. At the same time, Americans’ concerns about higher education continue to focus much more on cost than quality. Fully 74 percent of Americans agree or strongly agree that traditional colleges and universities offer high-quality education; only 5 percent disagree or disagree strongly. In contrast, only about a quarter of Americans believe a postsecondary education is affordable for everyone who needs it. College costs are the third most commonly mentioned concern when people are asked about the most important financial problem facing their families, and the top concern for adults under the age of fifty.

So the time is right for a reassessment of assessment. We need to deemphasize the use of student learning data for external accountability and focus more on improvement based on whatever information is most useful and cost-effective. It is time to reclaim and remake the assessment cycle as an improvement cycle in ways that will benefit our students the most. It is time to embrace a paradigm of improvement.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

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3. Ibid., 5.
4. The Voluntary System of Accountability, now part of the College Portrait, was one important result of this thinking. See http://www.collegeportraits.org.
How well are we doing? This question is central to the enterprise of higher education—students want to know what grade was received on the paper or test, faculty want to know what it will take to reach tenure or be reappointed, admissions staff want to know how many students need to be enrolled in order to provide the tuition revenue required to pay the bills, and so forth. In essence, individuals in higher education spend a good portion of their time measuring and assessing how well they are doing and whether they are meeting expectations or goals. It is ironic, then, that higher education institutions are so often described as resistant to assessment and standards of performance.

Just over ten years ago, the report of the Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education took post-secondary education to task for not being accountable for student success and challenged institutions to demonstrate serious attention to performance measures for students. Among the commission’s favored ways to address the perceived lack of accountability for student learning was through the utilization of standardized testing. The recommendations in the report, which came to be known as the Spellings report, followed closely on the heels of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which also targeted the measurement of achievement, but in primary and secondary education, through increased standardized testing of all students in key areas of learning—for example, language arts and mathematics. Following the release of the Spellings report, significant pushback came from higher education leaders and organizations.

In response to widespread objections to the use of standardized testing in higher education, the US Department of Education issued a special call for proposals, inviting higher education partnerships to design alternative approaches to measure student learning. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), along with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Land Grant Universities (now the Association of Public Land-grant Universities), received a grant from the department for a project called Rising to the Challenge: Meaningful Assessment of Student Learning. Through this project, AAC&U oversaw the development of sixteen rubrics, each keyed to a specific learning outcome that faculty and employers alike regard as essential to success in life and employment after college.

AAC&U’s work on assessment
For well over two decades—beginning long before the release of the Spellings report—AAC&U has worked with faculty and other educational professionals, students, regional and professional accreditors, and employers to develop responsive curricula and to identify learning outcomes that are essential for success in life, democratic society, and careers in a global environment. AAC&U’s work in this area has been guided by four underlying principles: (1) the measurement of student success should be multifaceted, (2) expected learning outcomes should reflect broad consensus among educators and employers, (3) education providers have valuable expertise and are central to improving student achievement, and (4) examining the actual work students produce in relation to their education yields the best evidence of how well educators and students are doing. In brief, AAC&U has for decades been engaged simultaneously with assessment for learning improvement and assessment for accountability, viewing these two strands as intertwined by necessity and practice.

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Meaningful Assessment on the Rise
Through a series of projects, surveys, and focus groups over several years, AAC&U has been exploring these principles. As the measurement of student learning has become a critical component of the accreditation process, for example, and as accreditation has become more important for student access to financial aid, AAC&U has engaged with regional and professional accrediting organizations to encourage their recognition of the need for multiple measures to satisfy internal academic and external policymaking audiences. Indeed, while the Spellings Commission was preparing its 2006 report, AAC&U was already summarizing a decade’s worth of findings from surveys and roundtables of employers as well as results from work with faculty across all types of campuses and organizations.

In a 2007 report, the National Leadership Council for AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative described and documented a broad consensus on a particular set of learning outcomes that are closely linked with academic success, employability, and civic engagement. The report articulated these consensus expectations for college learning as the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes, which have been formally adopted and adapted by higher education organizations across the country and abroad (see sidebar).

Contrary to the approach recommended in the Spellings report, AAC&U’s work has been centered on the recognition that, in order to achieve the learning that educators, employers, and the broader public say they expect of college graduates, faculty and other educators must be at the center of the improvement process. Of course, a key premise of the centrality of educators is that higher education does indeed promote higher-order learning, which involves mentored and mediated assistance as learners move into new or unchartered spaces and subjects. A contingent premise is that the assignments that accompany the instruction require students to demonstrate the expected learning outcomes at a desired level of proficiency or achievement. Therefore, the work that students produce in response to assignments or prompts from educators would logically be the best representation of the students’ learning.

**A role for technology**

One of the twenty-first-century drivers of life, both in and out of the academy, is the explosion in technology, which creates new possibilities for information processing and communication. Technological change is a given for today’s students, and it needs to become an integral part of the decision-making process within higher education organizations and institutions. The biggest cautionary point may be the inclination to fixate, at least temporarily, on the next shiny technological thing to appear on the scene. Whether it be MOOCs (massive open online courses) or data analytics (mining data
points and throwing them into correlational relationships to increase retention and graduation success), there always is enough benefit to engender investment and exploration. When the results fail to live up to expectations—even when there are observable benefits—we simply move on to the next shiny thing that emerges to capture primacy.

In Open and Integrative: Designing Liberal Education for the New Digital Ecosystem, Randy Bass and Bret Eynon offer a singularly insightful exploration of the nexus between higher education and technology. They argue for an approach to technology that is in service of student learning, rather than technology utilization per se. They call not for breaking the educational process into discrete and disconnected pieces that promise greater efficiency or cost savings, but for a focus on how to integrate and make meaning of learning in ways that also yield efficiencies and cost savings through higher rates of student retention, graduation, and engagement. In other words, Bass and Eynon argue for re-bundling higher education, rather than unbundling it.

A prominent technological medium already utilized across higher education institutions is the eportfolio. When done well, the use of eportfolios can be a high-impact practice. That is, eportfolio use has been identified as one of a set of educational practices that share several traits: they demand focused time and effort, facilitate learning outside and inside the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback to students and faculty.

As George Kuh recently observed, “the eportfolio is much more than a just-in-time twenty-first-century electronic record keeping system. It is an intentionally designed instructional approach that among other advantages prompts students to periodically reflect on and deepen what they are learning and helps them connect and make sense of their various experiences inside and outside the classroom that—taken together—add up to more than the sum of their parts.” As Kuh explains, the eportfolio has the potential to “serve as a portable, expandable, updatable vehicle for accumulating and presenting evidence of authentic student accomplishment including the curation of specific proficiencies and dispositions at given points in time”; to “document, integrate, and enhance the positive effects of other [high-impact practices]”; and to “make the extended educational transcript (something like a cocurricular transcript on steroids) initiative now being tested even more attractive to employers, institutions, and students themselves.”

Perhaps most significantly, eportfolios can be used effectively at higher education institutions of all kinds and to benefit all students. Further, the eportfolio accommodates the use of smart phones, social media platforms, networking, information search and processing, and other types of technology associated with today’s students as well as learning gained in online environments and from prior or parallel experiences.

The role of accreditation
Assessment of learning in higher education has been spurred and sustained primarily through regional and specialized accreditation. As a result, much of the culture among higher education providers has centered on compliance with accreditation standards. This, in turn, has been reflected in policy circles by demands for fairly simple metrics to measure student success. It is unfortunate that the assessment movement has been directed into this unsatisfying sidetrack.

As a critical component of quality higher education, accreditation has historically offered a way to ensure that a purveyor of higher education is financially capable of sustaining teaching and learning throughout the time needed to complete a course of study (hopefully culminating in a recognized credential) and that it provides the teaching and learning through well qualified and prepared individuals, curricula, and associated support services. The assumption has been that the ensuing learning would be of sufficient quality to warrant the investment.

Accreditation has offered accreditation-seekers the opportunity to make their own case and to reflect upon their enterprise in terms of demonstrating the myriad standards of capability and implementation, at least at an accepted minimal or average level of performance. By and large, higher education institutions have responded well to the standards, sufficiently meeting the expectations for reaccreditation with few, if any, recommendations for improvement in processes and information. However, as the economic situation has changed and new demands from employers, students and their families,
legislators, and others have focused attention on the outcomes for graduates, the nature of the expectations has also changed. Institutions are now required to produce more robust and varied evidence of what students are learning in preparation for life after college.

The good news, despite many claims to the contrary, is that accreditors now increasingly require more and better evidence of expected student learning. Multiple surveys and focus groups have shown that, although they sometimes use different language, educators and employers agree on a core set of essential and robust learning outcomes that all college graduates should be able to demonstrate at stated levels of competence or proficiency.

The challenge has been to determine how adequately to measure the desired levels of learning across the agreed upon outcomes. In the absence of widely accepted measures of learning to judge student success, proxies for learning have been used as the primary default metrics. These proxy measures—job placements, for example, or salaries for first jobs—do not necessarily reflect the core learning that educators believe graduates need and deserve for a lifetime of flourishing or what employers indicate they seek in hiring college graduates. It was precisely this lack of widely vetted measures of essential student learning outcomes that prompted the AAC&U-led Rising Challenge proposal to the US Department of Education in the wake of the Spellings report a decade ago and that led to the creation of AAC&U’s Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics.

The VALUE rubrics

Developed by teams of faculty and other educators from public and private higher education institutions across the country, the VALUE rubrics are based on previously existing rubrics and on research related to the key components and dimensions of each of sixteen learning outcomes. Before they were released publicly in the fall of 2009, the rubrics underwent two to three rounds of testing and revision by faculty on over a hundred campuses. The VALUE rubrics were designed to reflect expected levels of learning demonstrated by the work students produce in response to curricular and cocurricular assignments across two- and four-year degree programs. That is, the same rubric can be used to assess student achievement across different types of institutions, across different disciplinary areas, and by faculty from different fields of study.

Rather than assess what students cannot do, the VALUE rubrics were designed to assess what students can do and the level of learning demonstrated by their actual work. The rubrics reflect the level of learning, not the year in school; diverse students have diverse patterns of learning strengths and weaknesses that are not necessarily parallel to their year in school. The rubrics capture and reflect variation in learning by providing assessment across the multiple, key dimensions of the learning that underlay each of the learning outcomes.

Thousands of educational organizations have explored and used the VALUE rubrics since 2009, modifying and adapting them as needed to conform to their own missions or priorities. The consistent feedback from educators has indicated that the rubrics effectively capture the key dimensions of learning for each outcome, that the information gained through the use of the rubrics leads to improved pedagogy and assignment construction, and that the availability of the assessment results enables discussion of student learning and engenders faculty collaboration within and across departments and colleges.

The VALUE/Multi-State Collaborative

Beyond the anecdotal evidence that has emerged since 2009 from educational institutions and organizations using the VALUE rubrics for assessment, a national initiative—called the VALUE/Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Quality Student Learning—is now underway to determine whether rubric-based assessment of student learning outcomes can be taken effectively to scale. A partnership between AAC&U and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, this national initiative involves nearly a hundred institutions—two year and four year, public and private—and thirteen state higher education offices. The participants have committed to collect samples of student work from their respective institutions, identify faculty to score the work on three or four learning outcomes, and use the VALUE rubrics as the shared metric to assess the student work samples. In addition, the
initiative is conducting extensive reliability and validity studies and analyses of disaggregated results to enable examination of student demographic and institutional variables in relation to the assessment findings.

After engaging with faculty in the application of VALUE rubrics to assess student learning, Dan Berrett reported on the VALUE/Multi-State Collaborative for the Chronicle of Higher Education. “It’s the kind of acronym-heavy, jargon-laced endeavor that’s easily overlooked,” he observed. “But by measuring students’ intellectual skills, it might turn out to provide telling insight into one of higher education’s central functions.” Berrett noted that “what makes the effort notable is its subject of analysis: the authentic stuff of college—the homework, problem sets, and papers that students regularly produce. From those, evaluators . . . can produce generalizable and comparable findings across disciplines, institutions, and states about students’ critical-thinking, writing, and quantitative-reasoning skills.” He concluded that, citing the view of George Kuh, “the rubrics’ fundamental connection to the daily work of education . . . means this attempt may succeed where others have foundered.”

**Assessment for learning is happening**

Simplistic dichotomizing conceptions of assessment—accountability versus improvement, faculty led versus externally imposed, compliance versus learner centered—are being replaced by a recognition of the importance of demonstrating student learning and a reconsideration of what constitutes the best evidence of learning. Over the past ten years, higher education faculty and institutions have begun to meet the challenge of accountability by placing faculty and educator expertise and judgment at the center of assessment efforts that have student learning improvement as their primary purpose.

Building on its earlier work, AAC&U has helped facilitate the transformation of assessment into a high-impact practice. Assessment can be used effectively to improve student learning—not only content knowledge, but also the skills and abilities needed to apply knowledge to complex, unscripted problems and for career success in an ever-changing, technology-driven global environment. Indeed, we have now reached a point where learning improvement can be demonstrated in meaningful ways to students, ourselves, and those outside the academy.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

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**NOTES**

5. The VALUE rubrics are available for download from http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics.
On Building a Diverse Democracy

Justice and Identity in the Twenty-First Century

EBOO PATEL

In the spring of 2008, on a beautiful college campus outside of Pittsburgh, I found myself giving a keynote address alongside a man named Nechirvan Barzani. He was introduced to me by campus officials as an important Iraqi leader. By that time, the war in Iraq was over five years old and getting more unpopular by the day. I knew almost no one who supported it.

The fact that Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction were a Bush administration fiction was just one of several reasons why. Another, perhaps more important, justification for being against the war was based on identity. As an American Muslim, I knew that the lives of many of my coreligionists would be ruined. Opposing the war was an act of solidarity with my people. Most other American Muslims shared this logic, and most multicultural progressives, seeking to be good allies, did as well.

Being in the presence of Barzani gave me the opportunity to express a deeply held view to a member of a group who was directly affected by my government’s destructive actions. I shook his hand, gave him my salaam, looked him in the eye and said, “I’m so sorry for what my government has done to your country.” He stared back as if he didn’t understand. I thought that perhaps his English was a little shaky, so I repeated, “Mr. Barzani, I am sorry for what my government has done by starting a war in your country that has destroyed so many lives. I want to tell you that so many Americans—Muslims and those in solidarity with Muslims—opposed this war.”

Again Barzani looked confused, but this time I realized that the source of his confusion was not an inability to comprehend my words. He was perplexed because he understood me only too well. I watched his face turn from bewilderment to frustration and then flash to anger. He composed himself for long enough to spit out, “The only thing you should be sorry for is that your government did not get rid of Saddam fifteen years earlier, when he was using chemical gas on my people. I am a Kurd, and that monster tried to destroy us many times over. Now that he is gone, we are finally free.” And then he turned and walked away.

I’d had easily hundreds of conversations with fellow multicultural progressives about the Iraq war. The destructive impact of the invasion on Muslims was taken prima facie as a reason to oppose it. “Muslims” was always invoked as a single monolithic category, frequently preceded by the term “oppressed,” and almost never described or delineated any further. In our minds, there were just two groups—the oppressor American government and the oppressed Muslims of Iraq. There was really only one side to be on.

Preferred identities

Being a multicultural progressive means paying attention to identity, and caring about justice, and seeing the relationship between the two. There is a resurgence of such conversations on college campuses these days, mostly to the good in my view. My encounter with Barzani forced
me to reckon with the fact that my worldview was not quite as broad-minded as I’d liked to think. For as much time as my circles spent talking about the Palestinians, we almost never mentioned another stateless Muslim people, the Kurds. Having never really considered the experience or perspective of this identity, I had never conceived that they might have a different definition of justice when it came to the Iraq war.

The experience has made me wonder about which identities receive the most attention on college campuses, and what the implications of these dispositions might be. To that end, I was struck by a recent front-page story in the *New York Times* on campus diversity training.¹ Race, ethnicity, and gender were the focus of the workshops. There were references to safe spaces and trigger warnings, an implication that campuses employ such structures and devices to both heighten awareness of these identities and protect them from a range of aggressions. Such matters are quite familiar to me. They are the dimensions of identity that occupy my consciousness and the minds of most other people I know. They are without a doubt the “preferred identities” on selective college campuses.

In the same day’s *New York Times* was a column by Frank Bruni about an element of identity that wasn’t mentioned at all in the front-page article on campus diversity training: being a military veteran.² It turns out that at many elite colleges, you can count the number of veterans on one hand, and in most cases, it won’t even take all your fingers.

Something occurred to me. In all the multicultural progressive circles I’ve been in where people have been invited to identify themselves, I’ve probably heard hundreds of people say some version of, “my name is Erin, and I identify as a lesbian” or “my name is Carlos, and I identify as a Latino.” There is only one time I ever recall anyone identifying as a military veteran.

Is that because being a veteran is an insignificant identity? Because it does not shape one’s life or outlook or how one is likely to experience college? Or is it because my circles are, in their own way, quite narrow?

In his column, Frank Bruni pointed out that campuses recruit people (students, staff, faculty, and administrators) who are part of some identity groups in order to enrich campus life. Clearly, for elite campuses, veterans are not on this list. I started to think through the other implications of elite campuses preferring race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, while virtually ignoring military veterans. In addition to being the focus of recruitment and diversity training, there are courses on elite campuses that focus on some identities, centers where people from those identities can gather, paid staff with whom they can discuss their experiences. I wonder, for the few veterans at elite colleges, what courses they might take to explore their identity, what center they might go to where their community gathers, which staff or faculty members proudly wear their own military experience such that students who share that identity might approach them for an independent study or just an empathetic conversation over coffee.

College campuses that employ safe spaces and trigger warnings typically do so for preferred identities. The rationale is that racial minorities, women, and members of the LGBTQ community have experienced marginalization, oppression, and trauma in the larger society, and ought to be proactively protected in the intense environment that is the college campus, even if it means restricting the freedoms of others. A safe space for black students to talk about policing may, for example, bar white students.

What might happen if such protections extended beyond the preferred identities of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality to, for example, veterans? Consider this story. A friend of mine is a professor of religious studies at a highly diverse Texas university. While teaching his standard world religions course, he opened his unit on Islam by playing a recitation of the Qur’an. He noticed one of his students shift uncomfortably in his seat, get visibly distressed to the point of looking sick, and finally pack his bag and leave. This student came to see him during office hours and explained that he was a veteran and had recently done a tour of duty in Iraq. Several friends of his had been killed there, and he had been wounded himself. Anytime he listened to something as distinctive as Qur’an recitation, he had flashbacks to his friends being killed by IEDs to chants of *Allahu Akbar*. He asked the professor—my friend—why he wasn’t warned that Islam would be presented in such a vivid manner. He requested that he be excused from the entire unit, saying he could get a doctor’s note that confirmed that material about Islam triggered his PTSD.
Should military veterans as an identity group get warnings in courses—religion, history, literature—where Islam is on the syllabus because it might trigger their medically diagnosed PTSD? Ought there to be safe spaces set up for veterans when a Muslim speaker—say, me—comes to campus?

Expanding my worldview

College is where I developed my own multicultural progressive politics. I grew up in the western suburbs of Chicago during the 1980s and 1990s, and my highest aspiration was to be white. Of course, I didn’t realize this until I got to college in 1993, a time of identity consciousness that reminds me of our current moment.

I remember going to see the film version of Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* with a group of guys from my residence hall during my first year in college. I walked out with tears in my eyes because the film reminded me so much of my own childhood growing up in an Asian-American household. They walked out asking about the nearest Taco Bell. I let them get their fake burritos and went to the library to look up books about minorities in America. In high school, I would have buried my ethnic identity; in college, I got to explore it.

Just about all the courses I took had some kind of focus on minority identity experiences. It was in college that I first considered the long-term effects of slavery and segregation, that I first recognized that there was such a thing as “the African American experience,” and that I became aware of the racism in our criminal justice system. I was surprised to learn that crack cocaine had significantly higher criminal penalties than the powder form. “Why’s that?” I wondered aloud in a sociology class. A black student a few rows away looked at me and said, incredulously, “Do you not know?”

It was in college where I made my first gay friends and went with them to see *Angels in America* three times. I was profoundly affected by their stories of coming out, of people they knew who were HIV positive, and those they knew who had died in the slaughter years of the 1980s. I came to share their deep frustration that it took a straight white boy named Ryan White to contract HIV and die of AIDS for the American public to start paying sympathetic attention.

I had a friend who was part of the Society of Women in Engineering. I scoffed when she left dinner early one night to attend a meeting of the group. “Do you know how male-dominated engineering is?” she scolded me. “You don’t think the Barbie doll that said ‘math is hard’ has anything to do with that?”

I started to see how much of my life and my world had been defined by race, gender, ethnicity,
and sexuality. It was like the scales falling from my eyes. Some people, by dint of their privileged identity in the aforementioned categories, were oppressors. Others were oppressed. I applied this Manichean lens to just about everything. I went off to England to do a PhD. I knew I wanted to do an ethnography of young people that had something to do with identity. I fell in with a group of young South Asian Londoners and started doing participant observation in their world and engaging them in semi-structured interviews. Naturally, I asked them how their ethnicity affected their lives. It had affected mine so profoundly, something I had realized when I was about their age. They didn’t really know what to do with my questions. I told stories of my own growing up and wondered aloud if they related to the overt racism and microaggressions I’d experienced as an adolescent. They didn’t. I theorized that they had simply internalized their racism so deeply that they had neither the framework nor the language with which to describe it. I read British postcolonial theory and came up with ingenious ways to interject race and ethnicity into conversations and interviews. Still no spark.

“Maybe they just don’t think of themselves primarily through the lens of racism?” my advisor mused after I showed him my field notes and the transcripts of the interviews. “A white guy would say that,” I thought to myself. I kept trying to dig regarding racism, and my research subjects kept shrugging their shoulders as I asked my questions. At some point, I had to wonder to myself: Why do I keep insisting that they feel and see things that they don’t seem to be feeling or seeing? Do I want them to be victims of racism? Was I guilty of telling these people what their experience was, or worse, what it ought to have been?

For their part, what they kept telling me was that the most important part of their identity was being Ismaili Muslims. “Aha,” I thought to myself, “I don’t know much about religion, but I know what paradigm to put that in. As Muslims, you must feel oppressed by Christians.” And so the whole cycle started again. I’d do semi-structured interviews trying to get them to talk about how oppressed they felt by Christians and, well, let’s just say my advisor had to make a similar comment to me about six months later.

It turns out that my Ismaili Muslim subjects did feel uncomfortable vis-à-vis another group in Britain—other Muslims! This did not fit at all comfortably into my multicultural progressive worldview, especially when I learned that many of those other Muslims occupied a lower social class than the well-heeled Ismailis. Which group was the oppressor, and which was the oppressed?

And so I faced an interesting conundrum. Would I expand my worldview in a manner that absorbed what I was learning about the world, or would I try to squeeze the world into my worldview?

Which lesson would I choose to draw from my college experience? That I had now discovered the identities that matter and would go through the rest of my life looking at the world through that paradigm? Or that I discovered identities and experiences that were previously unknown to me—identities I hadn’t paid much attention to, experiences I haven’t had—and that there are likely to be more of those as I continue with life? College had been a wonderful expansion of a narrow worldview. What other expansions might be in store?

**Liberal education**

Martha Nussbaum makes a powerful observation that is highly relevant to our current moment: “All modern democracies are prone to hasty and sloppy thinking and to the substitution of invective for argument.” A rigorous liberal education that emphasizes critical thinking about one’s own paradigm and a sympathetic understanding of other identities serves as a kind of public health plan for societies like ours. It is particularly troubling, therefore, to see social justice conversations tend toward denunciation over engagement in the very places—college campuses—charged with advancing liberal education.

Extrapolating from Nussbaum’s thesis that liberal education is about “the creation of a critical public culture, through an emphasis on analytical thinking, argumentation and active participation in debate,” I believe a liberally educated person should recognize that, in a world of different identities, there are likely to be different definitions of justice, especially when it becomes clear that different people who have similar identities interpret those differently. Diversity is not just about the differences you like. It’s also about the differences you don’t like, the disagreements. Any time...
you are in a room where everyone agrees with your definition of justice, it is probably not a diverse room.

A liberally educated person should also recognize that the reasonable expression of one identity can be an affront to another. The desire of a Kurd to remove Saddam Hussein is an injury to the hope of a Sunni Ba’athist to keep him. When a Christian says that Jesus is the Son of God, it affronts a Muslim’s belief that Jesus is the Messenger of God, but not his son. When Muslims eat beef, it affronts a Hindu’s belief that cows are sacred and should not be slaughtered for food.

And a liberally educated person should recognize that it is not always easy to determine which identity matters more, or which side to be on. Oppression is a slippery standard, and an overused and overheated one. Also, even when who qualifies as oppressed is clear, the next steps are fraught. Kurds are oppressed in Iraq. Does that mean you or I should have been in favor of the war?

One mark of being an educated person is recognizing that the world is unlikely to fit inside your worldview. Part of what I believe a college education is about is proactively looking for the hard examples, the cases that do not fit inside your worldview, precisely to expand it. This is a variation on Karl Popper’s falsification theory. Put simply, do not look for the illustrations that confirm your paradigm. Instead, be on the lookout for the examples that challenge and, therefore, might expand it.

There is value in the multicultural progressive paradigm, and there are limits. My favorite story about the current limits is contained in James Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time—a mid-twentieth-century book that has been rediscovered in recent times, referenced heavily in works by Ta Nehisi Coates and Jesmyn Ward. It rocked my world when I first read it in my early twenties. I loved its pull-no-punches description of the effects of white racism on black lives: “This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.”

But in my rereading, a different storyline emerged for me. Baldwin, largely out of his disgust regarding white racism, accepts an invitation to Elijah Muhammad’s dinner table. He finds himself profoundly uncomfortable there. He finds the talk of total racial separation to be borderline insanity. The comment about the evils of drinking the white devil’s poison makes him shift in his seat, considering that he is heading to the north side after the dinner for a drink with a white friend.

At the end of the day, Baldwin understands Elijah Muhammad’s anger, but he doesn’t want to live in his world. It causes him to reframe some of his own thoughts about his role in the United States and his dreams for his country. He ends the book with two observations that I keep close to me as I participate in the American experiment:

I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores.

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and change the history of the world.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aaccu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

NOTES
4. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 98.
7. Ibid. 105.
Certain widely tested educational practices have been shown to have a significantly beneficial impact on student learning and success in college. And while they demonstrably benefit all students, their impact is particularly high for students from historically underrepresented groups. These “high-impact practices” include first-year experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning, community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects. The practices can take many different forms, depending on learner characteristics as well as institutional priorities and contexts.

As campus leaders work to integrate more high-impact practices, or to scale-up existing ones, they tend to focus their efforts on the faculty. The widespread assumption is that what’s needed most is greater faculty awareness of their value. Then, once faculty value these practices, the thinking goes, they will need shortcuts for implementing them. Faculty are busy, and if implementation is too complex, they will ignore the practices—even if they recognize their value.

Certainly, efforts to facilitate implementation are important. And indeed, over time, rubrics and other tools have been developed to support faculty efforts to design or adopt high-impact practices in their courses. However, we have begun to question the assumption that the problem has mainly to do with faculty awareness and the availability of shortcuts to ease uptake.

National surveys of faculty, as well as surveys of faculty on individual campuses, show increasing knowledge of high-impact practices. For example, in a recent study exploring the views of faculty participants in the California State University System’s STEM Collaboratives project—an effort to improve the success of first-generation, low-income students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields—we found very high levels of knowledge of evidence-based, high-impact practices. Yet, these same faculty members noted a lack of rewards and infrastructure to support their utilization of the practices. National data also reveal a more general lack of structural support for teaching, particularly among the new majority of adjunct faculty who are off the tenure track.

Balanced attention to the ways both faculty and administrators can work in tandem to support high-impact practices will greatly aid efforts to scale and sustain changes that would otherwise be impossible in the current environment.

ADRIANNA KEZAR and ELIZABETH HOLCOMBE

Support for High-Impact Practices

A New Tool for Administrators

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of their control affect their ability to scale and sustain high-impact practices.

What may actually be needed most is greater awareness among administrators about how to support the use of high-impact practices.

The role of administrators
As we reflect on higher education change efforts, we observe an ironic twist. Because of the power that historically has been vested in the faculty, other campus leaders often believe that, rather than mandate change, they can do no more than simply support change efforts—largely through positive rhetoric—that emerge from the “bottom up.” This belief disguises the important reality that administrators can and should act to support faculty use of high-impact practices. Classroom practices are embedded in larger institutional systems; high-impact practices are unlikely to be scaled and institutionalized if they are not supported by these larger systems.

Greater definition is clearly needed with respect to how administrators can act to support high-impact practices—not just in word, but also in deed. In various change studies, we have asked about what administrative support means on campuses. Almost universally, respondents identify motivational speeches, verbally creating a sense of priority, and the like. When asked about specific actions they might take, administrators express uncertainty about what more concrete forms of support might look like and a hesitancy to take action.

To help administrators identify specific actions they can take to support high-impact practices, we developed the High-Impact Practices for Administrators Tool. This new self-assessment tool, focused on nine key areas of support, is designed to enable self-reflection at the institutional level. It can be used to identify gaps in support for high-impact practices as well as gaps in communication about currently available support.

At some institutions, this tool has revealed significant discrepancies between administrators, who point to policies and practices already in place to support high-impact practices, and faculty or staff members, who are unaware of those policies and practices. Where faculty and staff are unaware of existing efforts to support high-impact practices, the tool can demonstrate a need for greater communication. Below, we briefly review each of the nine broad areas of support that the tool is designed to survey.

1. Individual assessment and evaluation
One way to identify a need for high-impact practices and to determine whether existing practices are working well is to help faculty become versant in assessment. Good teaching will not automatically result from high-impact practices, especially those that are poorly or incorrectly used.

Administrators should use assessment data to identify problems at the institutional level and to communicate patterns of student performance to departments and schools. Typically, faculty do not have direct access to such data, and administrators provide them with insufficient and often indecipherable data taken from institutional research reports. Moreover, most faculty requests for specific data related to questions about their students go unfulfilled. To address such problems, many campuses are creating comprehensive, user-friendly data dashboards that offer new ways to visualize, manage, and understand data. If paired with professional development to facilitate their use, these dashboards can help meet faculty needs.

Finally, administrators should identify measures of teaching excellence that recognize and reward the use of high-impact practices. Current systems that rely on student evaluations to measure teaching excellence do not encourage the use of better teaching methods. Moreover, student ratings of faculty often decline when faculty use active-learning techniques, problem solving, or intensive writing assignments, as these are more challenging and require more work and engagement on the part of students. More direct measures of teaching quality and student learning—such as observations, portfolios, and the like—will be needed as the use of high-impact practices becomes more widespread. Administrators can revamp assessment and evaluation infrastructures to ensure support for high-impact practices.

2. Mentoring and professional development
Increasingly, centers for teaching and learning that support high-impact practices are providing opportunities for professional development. These opportunities are often limited to the centers, however, and faculty requests for support
to attend pedagogical conferences off campus are often denied. Additionally, most learning communities of faculty interested in exploring the use of high-impact practices are thinly supported, if at all. And mentoring is seldom supported or rewarded.

Yet, new models are emerging. For example, faculty at the University of North Carolina (UNC) who train other faculty in active-learning strategies are eligible for course releases. Over time, as faculty across entire departments are trained, support for mentoring will be limited to new faculty members. UNC is one of the few institutions that provides formalized institutional support for this type of mentoring.

3. Contracts, promotion, and tenure
It is extremely difficult to implement high-impact practices at institutions that rely on large numbers of part-time faculty. While the Association of American Colleges and Universities has developed resources to help facilitate the use of high-impact practices by part-time faculty, it is nonetheless essential to examine the composition of the faculty and to ensure the availability of a proportion of full-time faculty that is sufficient to integrate high-impact practices into the curriculum. Administrators often overlook the ways in which their own hiring patterns constrain the use of high-impact practices. Part-time faculty may sincerely want to implement service learning or intensive writing assignments, but the constraints of their positions render them unable to do so.

For many full-time contract faculty, there is no promotion schedule that encourages quality teaching. And for tenure-track faculty, promotion and post-tenure review processes rarely account for teaching quality. Specific attention to high-impact practices during post-tenure review would encourage their use. Administrators also should consider establishing a promotion schedule for full-time faculty, both on and off the tenure track, that aligns with the goal of increasing the utilization of high-impact practices. Faculty do what they are hired and incentivized to do. The hiring of part-time faculty hinders the use of high-impact practices, and current promotion structures do little to encourage them. Given that faculty have little or no control over hiring patterns, promotional schemes, or contract types, administrative support in this area is critical.

Some campuses are experimenting with new faculty models. In the University of California system, for example, administrators are increasing the number of discipline-based education researchers. Faculty in these positions are hired on long-term contracts and with security of employment, but without tenure. They conduct research on teaching at the departmental level and often across the campus in order to support innovation, and they are promoted and evaluated based on their scholarship of teaching.

4. Rewards and incentives
Administrators control financial resources that can be deployed as rewards or incentives for new work, which gives them another key lever for supporting high-impact practices. Course releases, summer salaries, seed grants, workload adjustments, and workload reallocations are among the ways rewards and incentives can be structured to promote the adoption of new teaching and learning strategies. Resources are most critical during the initial adoption phase, when faculty are altering courses to utilize the new approaches. As faculty become more expert in high-impact practices, they are able to implement them across multiple courses. If the practices are truly to become widespread, however, administrators will need to provide incentives that make time available for faculty to adopt them.

5. Facilities and scheduling
On some campuses, administrators are making structural changes to support active learning, perhaps most notably in the sciences, by incorporating technology and other interactive elements into facilities plans. Movable tables, more technology, and interactive rooms are being built as space becomes available. At Harvey Mudd College, for example, the R. Michael Shanahan Center for Teaching and Learning serves as a
model environment that promotes collaborative, interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

Administrators should also examine course scheduling, an area where changes can be made at no cost. The potential for scheduling to support pedagogical change is often overlooked. Simply reconfiguring the frequency and duration of a course—for instance, from one hour three times per week to an hour and a half twice per week—can give faculty the extra time they need to implement more high-impact practices.

6. Strategic priorities, program review, and other quality-assurance processes

Faculty look to administrators for an understanding of what the institutional priorities are, where resources will be deployed, and what will be rewarded and supported over the long term. Faculty are loath to join efforts that are insufficiently resourced or that do not carry rewards. If administrators want faculty to use high-impact practices, therefore, they need to ensure that faculty are aware of resource allocations intended to make the work possible. Without adequate support, faculty are unlikely to reach out to community groups, set up service opportunities, or maintain communication with community groups.

Regular campus processes should also support the use of high-impact practices. Program review, for example, has traditionally been predicated on communication in one direction: campus-based or central administrators provide feedback on the quality and effectiveness of departmental work. Yet, high-impact practices may not be explicitly included in these measures of quality or in other processes that set standards of quality on a given campus. Rather than simply maintaining timeworn processes, administrators should reevaluate them to ensure that their goals, standards, and measures are aligned with current strategic objectives.

7. Partners for learning

Undergraduate research, service learning, capstone courses, internships, diversity/global learning, and community-based learning, in particular, utilize partners to help amplify learning among students. Individual faculty members generally do not have the time, resources, or connections to reach out to all the different partners needed to support these high-impact practices. Administrators are better positioned to develop and sustain formal partnerships in undergraduate research, for example, or internships. International or global work can present an even greater challenge for faculty. Even in more specialized situations where faculty may feel well positioned to establish partnerships, administrators should still make financial resources available for partnership development or provide administrative support for outreach efforts.

8. Campus policies

As faculty attempt to implement high-impact practices in their courses, they sometimes run into campus policies that slow or stall their progress. For example, a curriculum committee may question newer approaches like service learning or capstones. At some institutions, curriculum committees are largely in the hands of faculty, and their leaders may not be aware of the value of new pedagogical approaches. Similarly, some institutions will not grant credit for first-year experiences, as these courses may not seem to fit into traditional academic or disciplinary categories. Yet, by designating these high-impact practices as credit-bearing courses, the institution gives them legitimacy in the eyes of students and faculty and incentivizes students to take this work seriously. Additionally, institutional policies related to how faculty receive credit for team-taught courses or which department can list the course sometimes prevent departments from collaborating on important high-impact practices, such as first-year experiences and other interdisciplinary courses.

Administrators should also ensure that grading policies are not misaligned with the goal of implementing high-impact practices more widely. For example, a department may require that faculty in all sections of a particular introductory course base their grades on uniform midterm and final examinations that do not reflect the key learning goals of a section that utilizes high-impact practices.

9. Collaborative planning

Some high-impact practices, such as capstone courses or common intellectual experiences, require collaborative planning, yet administrators often provide no vehicle for such planning or incentives for work across departments and units.
As noted above, campus policies can inhibit collaboration. Administrators should review existing administrative structures in order to remove barriers to collaborative work and encourage the creation of cross-departmental teams, shared incentive and credit structures, and team-taught or team-created courses and learning experiences.

Administrators on many campuses are reforming campus structures to support collaboration. At both George Mason University and California State University–Monterey Bay, for example, administrators have created cross-functional teams to support greater collaboration. Further, at George Mason University, new centers have been created to help coordinate interdisciplinary work, and a blended academic and student affairs division now supports high-impact practices.

Conclusion

The High-Impact Practices for Administrators Tool described in this article provides a powerful means of reflection for administrators who seek to support the broader use of high-impact practices at their institutions. The tool does have some limitations, however, particularly for administrators who operate within larger systems that constrain their ability to provide infrastructure and support.

At some institutions, collective bargaining agreements govern salary, hiring, evaluation, and promotion processes. Administrators on unionized campuses should work with union leaders to incorporate provisions that ensure these processes support faculty use of high-impact practices. Where administrators and union leaders do not have the collegial relationship needed to shape these processes, faculty who support high-impact practices should be encouraged to work with their union representatives to alter collective bargaining agreements as needed to support high-impact practices.

For a campus that is part of a state system, decisions related to promotion or resource allocation are likely to be centralized. In such cases, the High-Impact Practices for Administrators Tool can be shared with policymakers at higher levels who have the authority to make decisions that shape the teaching and learning environment—for example, decisions affecting facilities, resources, and scheduling.

Nonetheless, we are convinced that the High-Impact Practices for Administrators Tool can be used to bring into sharper focus the ways administrators can support high-impact practices. And, as it is often the case that good work done by administrators is not communicated to faculty effectively, the tool also can be used to identify communication gaps and to enhance faculty understanding of existing supports. Balanced attention to the ways both faculty and administrators can work in tandem to support high-impact practices will greatly aid efforts to scale and sustain changes that would otherwise be impossible in the current environment.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors’ names on the subject line.

NOTES


2. See, for example, the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ LEAP Campus Toolkit, which includes an interactive library of research narratives, examples of campus work, and assessment instruments related to high-impact practices (http://leap.aacu.org/toolkit/high-impact-practices).

3. Paper in preparation; to learn more about our work with the CSU STEM Collaboratives project, see http://www.uscrosnier.org/pullias/research/projects/csu-stem-collab/.


5. The “High-Impact Practices (HIPs) for Administrators Tool” is available for free download at http://www.uscrosnier.org/pullias/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ 
HIPs-for-Admins-Tool-Formatted.pdf.


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In *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, George Kuh identifies ten practices that have demonstrably positive effects on student learning and achievement in college: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service-learning and community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects. More recently, Ashley Finley and Tia McNair provided evidence that students who engage in multiple high-impact practices report even greater perceived gains in learning than do students who participate in either one or zero practices. So we know that these practices are effective, but what are the most efficient and effective ways to integrate them into the curriculum?

Our experience with the 360° Program at Bryn Mawr College, which combines high-impact practices in an innovative format, has yielded valuable insights into the positive outcomes of student engagement in high-impact practices as well as potential challenges to their implementation. In a single semester—or, occasionally, across contiguous semesters—each student who participates in the 360° Program enrolls in an interdisciplinary cluster of courses that is focused on a theme, broad topic, or research question. The courses are taught by multiple faculty members, each in his or her own discipline, and all students in a given cluster take all the courses that comprise that cluster.

Reflecting the fact that many interesting questions are being explored at the edges or intersections of fields, the program emphasizes inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary work. As they design a 360° cluster, participating faculty are invited to develop their own definition of these concepts, with the expectation that, in using various approaches, theories, data, and methods to engage problems, they will be explicit about the ways in which they seek intersections among their disciplines. Once they have designed their cluster, the faculty work with each other and the students involved to evaluate, use, and combine different disciplinary perspectives in meaningful ways. Rather than a “parade” of faculty from different disciplines talking to the students from their individual perspectives, a 360° cluster entails engagement among the fully developed perspectives of the various faculty members, so that all the courses have an impact on one another. The 360° model is iterative by design: each individual course influences the others within the same cluster to allow learning to occur both incrementally and cumulatively.

A required element of any 360° cluster is student and faculty engagement in interactive experiences that extend beyond the typical classroom. This can occur through data gathering, research trips (domestic and international), community-based partnerships, artistic productions, curated exhibits, intensive laboratory activities, and other such opportunities for engagement. At the conclusion of the experience, faculty and students share their work with the entire community. The nature of the sharing is determined by the pedagogical goals of the cluster and the best method for sharing and reflecting upon the knowledge gained.

The 360° Program is an umbrella for a wide range of learning and teaching experiences that are realized in a range of configurations designed to meet the scholarly and pedagogical goals of this highly flexible curricular initiative. While a core theme, multiple courses and faculty, a nontraditional classroom experience, and a sharing of knowledge are required elements, all other aspects of a 360° cluster are flexible.
360° Program
Clusters may involve two to five faculty and two to four courses within the same semester or across contiguous semesters. While students in a 360° cluster are required to take all the courses that comprise the cluster, some of the courses may be open to other students as well. These additional students do not participate in the 360° programming, but they often benefit from the enrichment of the classroom nonetheless.

The most common 360° model comprises three of the four courses a student takes in a semester, with the fourth course allowing for progression in the major or fulfillment of general education requirements. 360° courses are offered at varying levels, enabling both deep and broad engagement in specific disciplines and at their intersections across the curriculum. The individual courses are each designed to provide a strong grounding in the intellectual questions of the field, and they are often recognized by the departments as fulfilling requirements of students’ major programs.

360° examples

In the fall of 2015, faculty in environmental studies, philosophy, and political science offered a cluster titled Climate Change: Science and Politics, which integrated philosophical, scientific, and policy perspectives to highlight the complexity of climate change and innovative approaches being developed worldwide to address related environmental challenges. At mid-semester, students and faculty travelled to southwest Germany, where two of the faculty members had strong research ties, to gain a comparative perspective on environmental policymaking, technology development, and local environmental practices and politics. The group met with technology and public policy research groups in Freiburg that are working both in academic settings and in public-private partnerships, visited mixed-use forests and sustainable farms, and did a case study of transforming heating sources in a small town. Students and faculty shared their experiences with the campus community via blog posts and incorporated their field experiences into final projects.

In 2013–14, a cluster titled Modern Art in Exhibition brought students together with two faculty members in the project of mounting an exhibition of significant works of modern American art, which were on loan to the college for this purpose from an alumna. This cluster involved one art history course in the fall and one museum studies course in the spring. The division across semesters allowed the fall course to scaffold the knowledge necessary to produce a strong and coherent exhibition in the spring. The beyond-the-classroom experience also spanned the academic year, as students researched and wrote catalog entries in the fall and executed the physical exhibition in the spring. The project allowed students to engage with a variety of practitioners in the field, from catalog and exhibit designers to museum educators, from development officers to high-profile donors. In an effort to reach a broad range of community members, the students created educational programming, web-based information, and a published catalog of the exhibition works. A series of guest speakers and consultants also gave students the opportunity to explore the professional opportunities associated with museum work, prompting some to explore careers they had not previously considered. Said one student, “I really liked the integrated learning. We got to see works of art in person, while getting to study the theoretical and practical aspects of the field. This helps with professional development.”

In 2016–17, participants in another 360° cluster are mounting a significant exhibition. Titled Mirroring the Self, Exhibiting the Self, this cluster includes an art history course that examines the history of portraiture and self-portraiture (including the ubiquitous “selfie”) and a museum studies course in which students will draw from college collections, the work of
Bryn Mawr–affiliated artists, and works loaned by alumnae to produce a spring exhibition and catalog.

360° clusters can also promote active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges, as exhibited by the fall 2012 cluster titled Women in Walled Communities: Silence, Voice, Vision. This single-semester three-course cluster examined the constraints and agency of individual actors in social spaces, with a particular focus on the institutional settings of colleges and prisons and the “critical spaces” that can open up within them. Two of the courses were taught on campus, and the third took place inside a local women’s correctional facility (with some on-campus elements). The cluster’s community reflection took a variety of forms, ranging from activism projects to raise awareness about educational resources available in prisons to multimedia projects documenting student struggles for social justice, within the college community and beyond. Following their participation in the cluster, the students continued to engage with the correctional facility through a weekly book club, and they helped the faculty develop the curriculum. The book club formed the basis for a subsequent 360° cluster, Arts of Resistance, which included a political science course, in addition to the original English and education courses.

High-impact practices and the 360° model
360° clusters, both in their overall structure and in the particular ways that Bryn Mawr faculty design them, provide students with multiple high-impact experiences. By definition, all 360° clusters are small learning communities that provide participants with common intellectual experiences. Many clusters involve global travel or engagement with diversity as a core element of the learning experience.

Some 360° clusters require undergraduate research. For example, the students who took a 2015 cluster of biology and geology courses called Coasts in Transition travelled to Belize, where they gathered data on the impact of different forms of coastal development on the native fish population. Many clusters incorporate service learning or community-based learning experiences, and in some cases associated internships are available for students who want to continue their engagement with the topic beyond the duration of the cluster.

The college-wide 360° Program crosses disciplines, involves a wide range of faculty, and engages a rich array of topics and themes. While participation is not required, all students are encouraged to enroll in a 360° cluster. Currently, about 15 percent of students do so, and we expect that number to grow as the program becomes more established.

Consistent with Bryn Mawr’s deep commitment to access and equity, the funding of the program is structured to ensure that participants do not incur additional tuition costs. The percentage of 360° participants who receive need-based aid (61 percent) is roughly equal to the overall percentage of students who receive need-based aid (55 percent). Similarly, the percentage of Pell grant recipients who participate in the program (17 percent) matches the percentage of Pell grant recipients across the college. Thus, financial aid status does not appear to prevent students from participating in these high-impact practices. In addition, the racial/ethnic breakdown of program participants mirrors quite closely the demographic distribution of the student body as a whole.

Assessment
To determine whether the 360° Program is achieving its stated goals and to evaluate the impact of participation on faculty and students, we have engaged in multiple forms of assessment. Quantitative assessments of student perceptions suggest that the experience is overwhelmingly positive. Ninety-three percent of students say that they would recommend their particular
360° cluster to other students, and another 4 percent say that they might recommend it. Ninety-eight percent report that the experience broadened their liberal arts education, 91 percent say that it allowed them to see connections that they would not have seen in a stand-alone course, and 85 percent say that participation has driven them to continue studying the topic of the cluster. The data also suggest that the level of engagement in a 360° cluster is higher than in a standard course of study: 94 percent of students report having spent more time with their professors than in regular courses, and 91 percent say that their interactions with other students have been of a higher quality than in other courses.

Qualitative evaluations of the program have highlighted the impact of the intellectual communities created by the structure of the 360° course clusters and the experiential learning opportunities that are central to it. In narrative reports, students have focused on the collaborative nature of the experience, characterizing it as intellectually or personally transformative. One student described her participation in a recent 360° cluster as the single best experience of her academic career, one that enabled her to find her voice as a writer and a person. Another student observed that her experience of making powerful connections between a real-world issue and theoretical approaches to it helped her understand the importance of the work she was doing. Faculty members observe a similar impact on their students, noting that the program promotes students’ ownership of their learning.

Interviews with participating faculty suggest that they benefit from the 360° experience as well. Although the faculty teach individual courses, they work toward a common learning goal. Participation in a 360° cluster gives them the chance to collaborate with partners across the college with whom they might not regularly interact, and it exposes them to other classroom styles. One mid-career faculty member said that before participating in the 360° cluster, much of his recent teaching experience had been in large lecture-style classes. While he had been eager to return to a seminar format for the cluster, he felt it would be a challenge. His observation of his colleague’s class, and conversations among the trio of faculty in his cluster, gave him concrete approaches to apply in his own classroom. He reports that the experience made him a better teacher. In several cases, faculty members have reported that their research was transformed by the collaboration and field experiences in which they participated.

Challenges
The 360° Program was originally conceived with sophomores and juniors in mind. These students were expected to be ready for the work of discipline-based courses, prepared to meet the challenges of project-based learning, and best situated for the kind of exploration inherent in a 360° cluster. To date, about 54 percent of participants have been in the sophomore or junior year. Some students are prevented from participating because of their schedules. Some need to take required courses for their majors (this is particularly true in the sciences, and science majors’ participation is lower), while others are occupied fulfilling distribution, language, and quantitative requirements.

In some cases, enrollment in the program is difficult due to outside commitments, such as participation in extracurricular activities or work schedules. While we strive to accommodate these commitments, some students nonetheless find it challenging to participate in a 360° cluster. We believe that these challenges have increased the percentage of seniors who enroll (on average, 34 percent). It seems that students may “save up” their last elective courses in order to participate in clusters once they have nearly fulfilled their other requirements.

While the benefits of the 360° Program are tremendous—as demonstrated by our own data and by other research on high-impact practices—the resource demands of the program are high. The choice to fund the program through the operating budget, rather than through additional fees, is costly. Due to the additional work and time involved, participating faculty are awarded 50 percent more teaching credit than for a stand-alone course. We also provide course development stipends to faculty and often give additional kinds of support as they develop the nontraditional classroom components. Fortunately, we have been able to raise funds from foundations and private donors to underwrite a portion of the cost. Because of the program’s innovative design and opportunity for high-impact learning, we have reprioritized our operating budget to provide further support for it.
Nonetheless, at least in its current form, the program requires a significant investment by the college.

**Conclusion**

High-impact educational practices support student and faculty learning and achievement. By creating an alternative structure through which students have access to these practices, and by investing resources to make that structure available to all students, Bryn Mawr College has been able to ensure that participation in high-impact practices occurs equitably across student populations.

While the elements and goals of the 360° Program are clearly defined, faculty and students have the flexibility to adapt the format in order to reflect the pedagogical goals of a particular cluster, the structure of the material, and the strength and expertise of the participants. The result is a program that is dynamic, creative, and evolving. High levels of engagement have led to considerable innovation and experimentation, building a sense of student and faculty ownership of the program that bodes well for its long-term success and sustainability.

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**NOTES**


It is notoriously difficult to change a core curriculum. As credit hours and course requirements are revised, politics quickly come into play and turf battles arise to create obstacles. In my experience, there are two default approaches to curricular change. The first is simply to “tweak” an existing core—renaming a few courses here and there, or sequencing them differently, but keeping the curriculum essentially the same. The second default approach is for the president or the vice president for academic affairs to assign a committee or task force to explore current trends, attend conferences, and develop a curriculum for the faculty to review and, ultimately, approve—or, at least, that’s the plan. More often than not, two or more years of committee work culminate in a proposal that the faculty does not support; after all, they haven’t attended the conferences, listened to the speakers, or discussed the committee’s innovative ideas. Accordingly, the faculty object to the proposed curriculum on the grounds that it would involve too many changes, or that it does not include the right mix of courses, or that it is not financially feasible, or that they like their courses the way they are.

Between 2010 and 2013, the core curriculum at Wesley College was successfully transformed through an entirely different process—a process that left all involved with far fewer battle scars than typically result from major curricular change efforts. Wesley is a Methodist-affiliated four-year college in Dover, Delaware, with a total enrollment of approximately 1,500 students, high percentages of whom are first-generation students and students of color, and approximately eighty faculty members. The new core, which was fully implemented in 2014, replaced a curriculum that had been in place for more than twenty years. Rather than taking either of the default approaches identified above, we approached the revision of the core through a process that can best be understood by applying the eight-steps for leading change devised by John P. Kotter, the Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership, emeritus, at the Harvard Business School.

Step 1: Create a sense of urgency
When a new strategic plan for the college was launched in 2008, revision of the core curriculum was identified as a prominent goal. The following year, a Middle States accreditation visit resulted in a strong suggestion to revise the core and align it with student learning outcomes. Both factors provided the urgency needed to start a conversation about a change to the core.

As it stood at the time, Wesley’s core curriculum offered students a plethora of choices under an umbrella made up of five thematic strands. To fulfill core requirements, students could opt for course choices throughout their college careers that were all at the one hundred level, with the single exception of a literature course at the two hundred level. There was no clear development of skills, knowledge, or dispositions over time, and no real sense of how the curriculum helped shape a Wesley graduate. Previous attempts to change the curriculum were driven by the administration with no solid participation from the faculty. Perhaps inevitably, these efforts did not result in lasting curricular change.

When I arrived as the new vice president for academic affairs in the spring of 2009, I knew that reforming the core would be a major task on my plate. But the prospect excited and challenged me. Before going to Wesley, I had read an article in Liberal Education about a campus community that had taken a fresh approach to changing a core curriculum. Instead of creating the ubiquitous committee, campus leaders decided to bring experts to...
—and Minimizing the Battle Scars
campus so that everyone could hear the latest on trends in general education. Faculty were invited to participate, but only as facilitators of the process, not as generators of content. In the article, the authors describe energetic conversations among all campus constituencies about curriculum and pedagogy, and while I thought that might be too much to ask, this approach made perfect sense to me.

Step 2: Build a guiding coalition
This brings me to Kotter's second step in leading change, which is to build a guiding coalition or team. The operative word here is “guiding.” I wanted to ensure that we did not fall into the common pitfall that results when a committee “owns” the content. But I also needed faculty buy-in. Where to start?

The first item on the agenda was making myself and a faculty leader more aware of the landscape of general education reform and establishing contacts with speakers who would eventually come to campus. In the spring of 2010, I invited the elected faculty chair of the academic affairs committee to join me in attending the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) General Education and Assessment conference in Seattle. There, we attended a variety of sessions that helped us understand the current research related to the development and reform of core curricula. One especially helpful session was presented by a panel of faculty from Roanoke College who had just completed a major revision of their core. At the session, we discovered that, in June, Roanoke was to host a workshop through which teams from other colleges and universities could learn about the process and results of Roanoke’s curricular revision. Here was an opportunity to expand our guiding coalition. We sent the chair of the academic affairs committee along with three other Wesley faculty members to the four-day workshop. They returned to campus invigorated by the possibilities and with the names of several potential resources for our own transformation.

Step 3: Create a vision for change
That August, during a daylong workshop for the full faculty, we began to develop our vision. We invited Paul Hanstedt, professor of English and director of pedagogical innovation at Roanoke College, to help facilitate our discussion. Paul had recently returned from Hong Kong, where, as a Fulbright Scholar, he had worked with universities seeking to transform their general education programs. We asked Paul to present the “big picture”—not to convince us that any one way was better than another, but to give us the range of possibilities based on current best practices. This began to generate excitement and energy among the faculty. They began to see the reform process as a way to create a core curriculum that would challenge and engage our students, helping them develop more nuanced skills and knowledge over time, and that would incorporate our mission-related values of ethical living and social responsibility. In other words, they began to ask, “What do we, as a faculty, want a Wesley graduate to look like?” The natural next piece of the conversation was to identify the skills, knowledge, and dispositions our students would need to achieve that vision.

Following the August workshop, members of the team that had participated in the earlier workshop at Roanoke College, along with several faculty volunteers, assisted in facilitating small group gatherings during the month of October. The purpose was to organize the ideas related to learning outcomes that had been generated during the August faculty workshop. While those group sessions provided a better sense of faculty priorities, there was significant overlap and a need to synthesize. Here was another opportunity to expand the guiding coalition.

We invited faculty volunteers to work with the material from the workshops, cutting out the overlap and developing what we called “value statements”—recurring themes related to learning outcomes. Five faculty members worked on this project between November and January. Then, in January, we again invited Paul Hanstedt to facilitate discussion at a daylong faculty workshop. Beginning with the listing collated by the small faculty group, the full faculty worked in interdisciplinary groups to create more precise student learning outcomes for each value statement. In February of 2011, after a little more work on the part of our synthesizing group, the learning outcomes for the new core curriculum were presented to the faculty and approved.

This seemed like the ideal time to send a Wesley team to the AAC&U Institute on General Education and Assessment. The team included
the chair of the academic affairs committee and four other faculty members representing a variety of academic departments and professional programs. The members of the team knew that their job was to facilitate the next step in the process, not to return to campus with a plan for Wesley’s core. The goal was to gather as much information as possible, meet as a team to discuss the process, and identify the best ways to relay new information to our colleagues.

Step 4: Communicate the vision
Because faculty were consistently involved in the yearlong development of learning outcomes, communication was built into the process. However, as the process moved forward, new people joined the faculty and others left. In any multiyear process, people forget where they have been and, at times, where they are going. It was, therefore, critical to keep a running list of the outcomes and decisions from the various workshops, conversations, and presentations. It was even more important to keep alive the vision of an innovative and substantial core curriculum that would be a defining element of a Wesley College education. With so many false starts over the years, many faculty were skeptical that this could be achieved.

The participation of the Wesley team in AAC&U’s 2011 institute was, without a doubt, a game changer in terms of moving the process forward. With approved learning outcomes in hand, we attended sessions focused on the elements of different models, the use of high-impact practices to enhance student learning, case studies about successful processes (and potential pitfalls), and ways to make assessment of the core meaningful. Probably most valuable, however, was the time we had to talk together as a team about Wesley’s unique challenges and opportunities, as well as our next steps. One charge at the institute was for the participating teams to develop action plans based on the current status of the change process on their campuses. Our plan included a presentation to the full faculty on various model elements, such as the inclusion of a first-year seminar, the design of integrated courses, the addition of cocurricular opportunities, and the incorporation of undergraduate research. After discussion by the full faculty, workshops were held throughout the fall to get a better sense of the faculty’s priorities.

Step 5: Remove obstacles, empower action
Kotter’s fifth step is sometimes called “removing obstacles,” and sometimes called “empowering action.” Wesley’s process involved a little of both. One way to remove an obstacle to change is to build the change into a practice that already has buy-in. A good example at Wesley is the inclusion of undergraduate research as a component of the first-year seminar. Undergraduate
research was already an important component of the Wesley College experience, particularly at the junior and senior levels. For years, Wesley had hosted an annual Scholars Day during which students from all classes presented papers, exhibits, recitals, and posters. These events generated energy and excitement from faculty and students alike, and over the years, undergraduate research had been expanding to include all disciplines.

As faculty discussed the new core curriculum, they voiced interest in developing a first-year seminar that would be topical in nature but with common learning outcomes. Individual faculty members would choose a topic about which they felt passionate, one that would engage first-year students. Topics ranged from bee-keeping to poetry writing, from learning about the local Dover community to reading mystery thrillers by international writers to gain insight into their cultures. The inclusion of some form of undergraduate research in the first-year seminars was a natural extension of an already existing strength at Wesley. The idea was to introduce students early in their college careers to the excitement and rigor of solving problems and also to enhance Wesley’s growing reputation as a school with a signature educational experience for all students.

Kotter’s notion of “empowering action” was realized on many levels. A new permanent core curriculum committee was added to the faculty governance structure and charged with reviewing and approving new courses based on learning outcomes and the inclusion of high-impact practices. Teaching institutes were held in the summer and between semesters, giving faculty not only the time and professional development they needed to learn about new pedagogies and create new courses, but also providing opportunities for faculty to collaborate across departments. Faculty received small, grant-funded stipends to attend the institutes, where outside facilitators helped with course development.

Jeffrey Osborn, dean of the School of Science and professor of biology at the College of New Jersey, worked with the faculty to create first-year seminars that incorporated undergraduate research; Paul Hanstedt returned to help faculty design integrative courses with writing assignments that promoted critical and creative thinking. New course development also drove new pedagogies, which became part of the discussion at the institute.

**Step 6: Create short-term wins**

All along the way, the process was punctuated by short-term wins that helped sustain the change energy. A faculty team presented the new core outcomes and components at a meeting of the board of trustees and received very positive feedback. Several faculty members preparing to pilot new first-year seminars were energized and excited—and shared this energy and excitement with their colleagues. The faculty realized that with fewer credits in the new core, more students could take minors. Transfer students could more seamlessly enter Wesley because the new core was simplified and more unified. Fears about faculty losing jobs dissipated as they saw opportunities to teach new first-year seminars or courses in the second and third tier of the core program. Through the efforts of the director of sponsored research, Wesley also began gaining recognition and grant support for core innovation through outside organizations like the National Science Foundation. Faculty proposals to present the core’s transformation were accepted at national conferences. A PBS television station in Philadelphia showcased Wesley’s new core in a segment on Delaware colleges and universities.

The new core focused on the development of skills at each level of the student’s four-year program; with each new level, the desired skills are more sophisticated and complex. In the first year, students take courses in essential skills and learning outcomes focusing on communication and inquiry. These include the first-year seminar; a quantitative analysis course that prepares students to apply statistics to everyday life; Frontiers of Science, a course designed to introduce the scientific method; and two writing courses, one focused on writing skills and the other on research skills.

In the second year, students experience the richness of the traditional liberal arts disciplines, as well as the connections among and between them, by taking integrative courses in four categories: Art and Culture, Religion and Philosophy, Literature and Languages, and History and Social Sciences. Instead of a history or English survey course that covers hundreds of years, for example, students take an integrative course like Literature and the Great War or Psychology and Sports. This enables them to see connections among the traditional liberal arts disciplines, which is one of the identified learning outcomes.
In the third year, students choose three courses at the three hundred level from different disciplines in a “concentration.” Concentration themes are directly related to core outcomes focused on social responsibility and understanding diversity. The core is then completed with the capstone course in the major, a course that synthesizes learning and often includes an application of skills and knowledge in an internship, undergraduate research project, student teaching, or nursing clinical.

The changes to the core curriculum had a significant impact on majors. The typical practice before implementation of the new core was for departments to require students to “choose” specific courses that complemented courses taken in the major. Thus, there was no unified core curriculum for all students, and the countless variations in core options based on departmental requirements caused significant scheduling difficulties. By contrast, faculty wanted the new core to be a signature experience for all Wesley students. After much discussion, however, a compromise was reached regarding math and science options, ensuring that students take courses that are both challenging and appropriate.

**Step 7: Implement and sustain the change**

The new core curriculum was approved by the faculty in February of 2013, after almost three years of work. Twelve first-year seminars were piloted in the fall of 2013, and the new curriculum was officially implemented in the fall of 2014. Implementation continued in the 2015 academic year, and the prospects are high that the new core will be sustainable and will result in increased student engagement, persistence, and graduation.

**Step 8: Incorporate the change into the institution’s culture**

The three years of conversation about the new core led to a more broadly shared understanding of Wesley College’s liberal arts mission. Because it is grounded in values already embraced by the faculty—undergraduate research, strong liberal arts exposure for all students, integration, social responsibility, and the celebration of diversity—the new core curriculum became not only a part of the culture, but actually helped define distinguishing components of the culture.

In retrospect, the beauty of the process was that when the new curriculum ultimately came to a vote, there were no surprises; faculty had been part of the conversation all along the way. And probably 60 percent of the faculty had been directly involved in the process in some way. Without doubt, this change could not have happened without the dedication and perseverance of many faculty leaders and the faculty as a whole. Was the process perfect? Not at all. It left some battle scars and fatigue, and there were messy moments. Some might argue that including the full faculty in such an immense undertaking is unrealistic and inefficient. But the outcome at Wesley was a core curriculum that is consistent with our original vision, that challenges and engages students, and that energizes faculty to teach new courses in innovative ways.

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**NOTES**

1. While so many Wesley faculty contributed to this reform effort, special recognition goes to Jeff Gibson, chair of the academic affairs committee during the change process and currently provost at Wesley, and Malcolm D’Souza, who directed sponsored research at the time and currently serves as associate dean for interdisciplinary/collaborative sponsored research. Their leadership during the core’s development and implementation, as well as their support of new initiatives through grant funding, was critical to the success of the project.

2. More detailed information about the new core curriculum is available online at http://wesley.edu/academics/programs/undergraduate-programs/core-curriculum.


Perhaps the best advice I have ever taken and applied to college administration came from an unlikely source: the farmer, poet, essayist, novelist, environmental activist, moral torch-bearer, and self-identified contrarian Wendell Berry. In an essay titled “Think Little,” Berry prescribes a counternarrative to the ongoing modernist push to use technology, science, and planning or lawmaking to “think big” in order to create social change on a grand scale. Recognizing that “there is no public crisis that is not also private,” Berry suggests that individuals should learn instead to “think little.” There it is. That’s it—two simple words that I return to often as I confront issues that affect my college and my colleagues.

According to Berry, and I tend to agree, “Thinking Big has led us to the two biggest and cheapest political dodges of our time: planning and law-making.” These same “dodges” apply to institutions of higher education and how we tend to respond to budget crises, curriculum revisions, and strategic planning. We form committees; we assemble working groups; we plan, review, talk, and plan some more. To be disciplined in our thinking, however, Berry suggests that we must recognize and take on the details. “[T]he citizen who is willing to Think Little, and accepting the discipline of that, to go ahead on his own, is already solving the problem. A man who is trying to live as a neighbor to his neighbors will have a lively and practical understanding of the work of peace and brotherhood, and let there be no mistake about it—he is doing that work.”

Berry’s point is simply that one must do the work that is required—enact and live out the desired change—in order to solve a problem. He adds the example of a farmer who may be dealing with soil erosion on an acre of land: “[he or she] has a sounder grasp of that problem and cares more about it and is probably doing more to solve it than any bureaucrat who is talking about it in general.” This anecdote leads Berry to a more specific example of what it means to “think little”:

I can think of no better form of personal involvement in the cure of the environment than that of gardening. A person who is growing a garden, if he is growing it organically, is improving a piece of the world. He is producing something to eat . . . he is also enlarging, for himself, the meaning of food and the pleasure of eating. The food he grows will be fresher, more nutritious, less contaminated by poisons and preservatives and dyes than what he can buy at a store. He is reducing the trash problem; a garden is not a disposable container, and it will digest and re-use its own wastes. If he enjoys working in his garden, then he is less dependent on an automobile or a merchant for his pleasure. He is involving himself directly in the work of feeding people.

The cumulative effect of individual work is large-scale change. If you wish to create change on a grand scale, do your part and encourage others to do so as well.
At the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where we recently updated our general education curriculum with an eye toward the essential learning outcomes identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities through its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, we have done just that. Our problems were not, and are not, unlike the problems on other campuses across the country. Money is tight, budgets are lean or have been cut, and interdisciplinary connections are sorely needed. Even so, we need to facilitate outstanding teaching, research, scholarship, and creative activity; we need to build, grow, and inspire.

Enter Wendell Berry’s idea, think little. Enter our college’s teaching and learning garden.

**A teaching and learning garden**

In the summer and fall of 2015, students, staff, faculty, and administrators across the College of Arts and Sciences came together to discuss common interests, particularly interests that revolved around environmental sustainability across our curriculum and opportunities for experiential and engaged learning.

In those conversations, the idea of a teaching and learning garden surfaced time and again.

With momentum from student organizations in the form of already-established raised garden beds at strategic locations on campus, coupled with interest from dynamic faculty sponsors, the notion of a teaching and learning garden already had some footing. A core group of individuals approached campus leaders with the idea of a teaching and learning garden.

Contextualized as an outdoor learning laboratory and alternative teaching space, the garden garnered administrative support. A plot of land, approximately one acre beyond the outfield wall of a campus ball field, was identified. Thanks to funds from our student “green fee,” as well as support from our graduate school and our office for undergraduate research, we broke ground on Earth Day 2016.

As new initiatives go, the project got off the ground—or, rather, in the ground—with relative ease. Our campus had the land, and we had the people in place to support the project both now and in the future. When the time came to explain to skeptics the value of such a teaching and learning space, we emphasized two main points. First, we emphasized the garden’s potential as a site for engaged learning and interdisciplinary connection—as, indeed, an embodiment of the arts and sciences. Second, we argued that a garden can be an ideal environment in which to enact the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes.

**Engaged learning and the garden as locus of the arts and sciences**

The natural tendency when one imagines the place of a garden in a university curriculum, especially one in which we are actually growing produce, is to think of courses in the natural sciences. In our biology and environmental sciences curricula, for example, we offer courses that include Introduction to Environmental Sciences, Principles of Biology, Conservation of Biodiversity, Ecology, and Plant Ecology. And we have, since the launch of the teaching and learning garden, added Urban Gardening at the first-year level. Such courses focus on the health and well-being of our water, soil, and air—our natural environment—as they emphasize scientific observation, lab exercises that utilize the scientific method, the collection of field data, evaluation of experimental data, and collaboration to solve environmental problems. It takes no great effort to imagine ways in which a college-wide teaching and learning garden can be used throughout such a curriculum. So let us consider the less obvious.

In the humanities, we are introducing the garden into programs and courses that range from English (Environmental Literature) to history (World History to 1400, which includes a focus on the role of agriculture and food production in ancient civilizations). If the thrust of the humanities is, as E. O. Wilson notes, to communicate and study “the natural history of culture,” then what better place than a garden? In gardens, we find reflections of our cultural values and community stories. The fact that our teaching and learning garden is on a campus that is situated in a metropolitan area, particularly one that meets the federal classification of a “food desert,” is itself a story that includes narratives about affordable housing, economic development, and access to whole or real food.

Resembling to some extent the one-acre garden at Yale University and the mission of Yale’s Sustainable Food Project, which Troy Duster and Alice Waters described in this very publication in 2006, our garden likewise provides “a launching site for accredited academic courses, informal workshops, and campus events.
highlighting food and agriculture. Through such activities, the project supports both hands-on knowledge of plant biology and careful long-term thinking about the relationship between economics and ethics. In the garden, therefore, we find fertile ground for a variety of conversations and academic disciplines. And like Duster and Waters, we find that a garden offers opportunities for engaged learning across a variety of disciplines.

In my own class (Environmental Literature), for example, the students and I read and discuss Carolyn Merchant’s *Reinventing Eden*, a work in which Merchant traces the Judeo-Christian story of the Garden of Eden, specifically the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden, as she likewise demonstrates how the Genesis story, with its prescription for both *stewardship* and *dominion*, has determined relationships between humans and nature over time. Specifically, Merchant maps “recovery narratives” in the form of either “progressive narratives” or “declensionist narratives.” For millennia, Western civilization has used the metaphor of the garden to situate human beings in relation to the natural environment. What better place to discuss Merchant’s work and such concepts than in the garden, in the object of study itself?

In the fine arts, we are considering ways to incorporate the garden into instruction in art, theatre, and music courses. For example, our sculpture and design students are investigating outdoor spaces and the aesthetics of natural forms. Our theatre and music students are excited to see the musical group Squonk Opera’s *Pneumatica*, “an outdoor event about air, made of air, and powered by air.” The group will perform its concert at the garden site, an event that is being coordinated with our campus’s performing arts series.

In the social sciences, we are offering a course that addresses issues related to socioeconomics and access to quality whole food, urban gardening, and social networking. Students in this environmental sociology course will learn to explain how society and the environment affect each other; identify social trends that shape today’s environmental problems; analyze and evaluate environmental data and information (i.e., basic scientific literacy skills) as well as societal interpretations of these data; critically evaluate and assess the practicality of various ecological solutions aimed at bringing about a more sustainable and just society; and become more environmentally aware and engaged citizens.

Imagine now a student’s academic schedule that includes any number of courses that integrate the teaching and learning garden and related concepts. There is endless potential for learning transfer, for “glocalizing” the curriculum, for problem-based learning, for engaged learning, for experiential learning, for community outreach and goodwill. Likewise, and to the benefit of the college, such a teaching and learning space intersects with, and provides a catalyst for, conversations across departments and academic disciplines. Indeed, other campuses in our region have already discovered such benefits and have been working in and with such teaching and learning spaces now for years. The garden as a
site for interdisciplinary connections, indeed as the embodiment of the arts and sciences, has very real and realized potential.

**An ideal (and natural) environment to enact essential learning outcomes**

The LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes articulate the goals of a quality undergraduate liberal education for the twenty-first century, calling for students to demonstrate achievement at successively higher levels in four broad outcome categories.

1. **Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world.** The acquisition of knowledge is not accomplished in just one course or even one academic discipline. But the opportunity for engaged learning—both engagement with the learning process itself and engagement with the object of study itself (the physical and natural world)—is ideally set outdoors in, say, a garden space.

2. **Intellectual and practical skills.** During the summer months of 2016, students who had internships or courses that included work in the garden learned firsthand about how low yield and low productivity result from extreme drought. They also learned how to mitigate such problems by watering and by insulating the soil with mulch, which helps both to control weeds and to retain moisture or a microclimate near the base of the plant and around the root system. In their Urban Gardening course, during an especially dry period, students learned how different plants either tolerate drought conditions, resist drought conditions, or escape drought conditions by dying off and dispersing seed. All these responses to drought, of course, have an impact on productivity and yield, so one problem creates yet another problem. In short, the students have come to see firsthand connections between the land and human well-being.

3. **Personal and social responsibility.** In the case of our teaching and learning garden, at least one-third of the harvest is committed to an area community kitchen. The students had a tremendous sense of satisfaction, for example, when they delivered over a hundred pounds of butternut squash, among other produce, to the community kitchen in late July of 2016. What’s more, they learned about the need for whole foods in that area of our city. They learned about real problems, like the need for food in the middle of a metropolitan city, from the very people who are working to address such need by preparing, cooking, and serving food to others.

4. **Integrative and applied learning.** As Troy Duster and Alice Waters show us, a one-acre garden such as the one at Yale can be an ideal space for engaged learning. The same is true in our garden. Indeed, students who are involved in the cultivation of food, to say nothing of preparing and eating food, are applying knowledge in the very context and the very subject matter of their academic lives. Gardening is not, after all, simply a scholastic exercise. One must actually do it.

**Conclusion**

It is important to note that Wendell Berry’s advice to “think little” requires an existing problem that needs to be addressed. In our case, we needed to offer more engaged and experiential learning opportunities for our students. We needed to meet our students where their interests lie.
We needed to break down disciplinary divisions and silos. But we were—and still are—working within the constraints of limited resources and reduced budgets. We discovered that a teaching and learning garden could help us address these needs in the form of gardening across the arts and sciences curriculum, and that we could implement this new project on a relatively small budget. We were thinking little, but we were making significant change.

I am mindful of the fact that other campuses have different needs as well as limitations of space and support. Nonetheless, we can all gain ground when we “think little” and begin to do the work that is needed to engage our students and one another where it counts—in a garden, in the seminar room, in the auditorium. We may continue to grow—literally—and we may find ourselves invigorated by the call to meet desired educational outcomes in new teaching spaces, new learning spaces, new research spaces. In doing so, we may find that it is indeed a great joy to get our hands dirty.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

NOTES
2. Ibid., 78.
3. Ibid., 79.
8. See http://www.squonkopera.org/about/history.
Generally speaking, whenever teachers are mentioned, so too are teachers’ unions. However, that is not the case in “right-to-work” states. Teachers in our state of North Carolina, for example, do not have a collective voice to represent them in local or state political arenas, where politicians are usually not well versed in educational practices. As a result, decisions are made about curricula, pay, student spending, health insurance, and retirement without any input from teachers. Experienced K-12 teachers and instructors working in our state’s public higher education institutions have not received a pay rise in almost a decade, and we tend not to learn about important issues before the General Assembly—such as a reduction of our health insurance coverage—until just before they are voted on.

Teaching in a right-to-work state
As higher education instructors who train preservice teachers in a right-to-work state, we struggle with feeling unsupported. In our field, we show preservice teachers how to teach effectively regardless of the situation, and so we decided to create our own supportive professional environment through the use of co-teaching. Co-teaching allows educators to share the burden of creating and implementing instruction through collaborative efforts with a focus on the best interests of students.

Co-teaching is prevalent in K-12 education, but we believe there is a need for co-teaching in higher education as well.

Higher education institutions are known for teaching within academic silos, and faculty often feel isolated from one another when designing new courses or implementing new content. One reason for this feeling of isolation may have to do with higher education’s multiple formats of instruction. Instructors must be well versed in teaching face-to-face courses, fully online courses, and blended courses. In our state, most faculty who teach in online environments have not been properly trained to do so. Co-teaching allows faculty to design courses collaboratively based on best practices.

When we were given a new fully online graduate class, for example, we were pressed for time and needed to design a high-quality course for our students. Our different levels of content expertise lead us to consider working together. We knew that co-teaching part of a course would enable us to support one another during content development and course design. It would also allow us to demonstrate the application of best practices for our students. We decided to co-teach a module within the graduate course even though there was no supplemental pay provided, which may not have been the case in a unionized environment. We took it upon ourselves to create our own framework of teaching through the support of one another without outside guidance because we both had been feeling excluded and run down.

We decided to start small, as we had never co-taught together before and our work responsibilities were overwhelming. We took one module from the fully online course, which lasted for two weeks, and implemented a lead-and-support model of co-teaching. This model allows one instructor to serve as the lead instructor of the course, while the other serves as the support instructor. We began by sitting down one day for about an hour to determine what content to cover and who would find what supplemental materials, and we designed a rubric to be used for the module assessment.
We then went our separate ways to gather supplemental materials. All the materials were sent to the lead instructor, who was in charge of uploading the module on our learning management system. Once the course was open to the students, we both introduced ourselves, engaged in discussion posts, and answered content questions. As a result of our combined planning, the module ran smoothly, and the students produced impressive learning outcomes.

**What works in co-teaching**

The experience of collaborating with one another expanded our content knowledge, created a supportive academic environment, and reminded us that we love teaching. Through the instructional design process, we were able to develop content in a time-efficient manner as we both provided ideas, and each instructor found resources for specific content aligned with her area of expertise. The energy and excitement of designing this module was palpable as we bounced ideas off one another. If something did not make sense to one of us, the other had to rearticulate it. This allowed us to produce instruction that was clear and concise for our students. The interaction was a powerful reminder of the need for clear communication, particularly in online courses.

We thoroughly enjoyed co-teaching together, and we found that our pre-established working relationship developed into a strong and supportive friendship that provided for easy communication throughout the experience. Whether in agreement or disagreement, we had a solid basis for working with one another and talking through our options. We actually enjoyed the process of give and take through which we reached the best possible outcome for our students. The process helped us establish a continuous support system with integrated mentoring and professional, as well as personal, support. The co-teaching framework for course delivery provided content-rich assignments that were feasible for students to creatively demonstrate their understanding of the material. In grading assignments and determining final scores, we were able to diminish instructor bias by averaging our scores for each student. By combining our comments, we were able to provide the students with an abundance of feedback.

**Challenges of co-teaching**

Although our co-teaching module was successful, it did pose several challenges. We chose to co-teach a course for which neither of us would be financially compensated. Also, this was a new course in a recently designed program. The primary challenges of co-designing concerned the amount of time dedicated to creating the module and content focus. Although we enjoyed working with each other, we had to spend additional time designing the course because we did not always see eye to eye on content. The process for creating our module required a certain amount of give and take; it became apparent that one of us was passionate about adding a particular aspect of content, for example, while the other did not share the same passion and preferred to focus on something different. Such disagreements never escalated
because we both respected one other’s opinions, but we both had to be okay with letting go of our need to control the development of the module at certain times.

The student-teacher relationship posed a more significant challenge. The lead instructor was able to develop closer relationships with students as she received questions and inquiries regularly. By contrast, the supporting instructor had limited interaction with the students and felt disconnected from them. The lack of a personal relationship with the supporting instructor was evident in the grading comments, because the lead instructor was able to make more personal connections in her feedback.

While the grading process yielded positive results for the students, it had some drawbacks for us. We each graded all assignments separately, using our grading rubric and providing comments for feedback. After we both had graded the students’ work, we came together to average the numerical scores and combine the feedback. This took extra time, and we encountered several issues, including the different ways each of us provided the scores and comments in the rubric. We realized that we should have communicated more thoroughly about how we planned to combine our feedback and the scores because when it came time for combining, we had to rework our previous feedback. But we learned from our mistakes and would make adjustments in the future.

**Surviving in a right-to-work state**

Working in a nonunion state has indirectly forced us to create innovative strategies in our daily practices. Without the support of a union serving as our voice, we know that our jobs are not as secure as unionized jobs. We work in an environment that requires us to stay dedicated to our profession and our colleagues in order to survive in an ever-fluctuating politically controlled career.

We can’t help but think that if we were in a union state, we may have had additional support to make the learning experience even more effective for ourselves and our students. Even though we decided to co-teach only one module, we continued to collaborate during the remainder of the course. The lead instructor taught the remainder of the course modules, but she always knew she could call on the supporting instructor to co-design additional modules. We created our own supportive professional working environment during a time when we felt overworked, underappreciated, and exhausted.

Teaching in a right-to-work state has many downsides, but it does force us to decide for ourselves how to support one another. We have the flexibility to attempt innovative strategies without a mediator dictating stipulations. The instructional design of co-teaching offers us backing as we refuse to let one another flounder. We are educators; we help one another—it’s what we do. We survive because we support one another.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors’ names on the subject line.

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