The purpose of this report is to share a summary of my experiences and insights related to providing leadership from Institutional Research to department-level learning assessment at Haverford through the Tri-College Systematic Improvement Grant from the Teagle Foundation. Here I will distill the key themes that emerged from my journal entries, which are attached to provide additional detail.

As the primary institutional contact for the grant, the IR role was to coordinate within Tri-Co, developing a strategy for achieving the grant’s dual goals of encouraging faculty ownership of assessment of student learning and metathinking about appropriate institutional support for the process to make the efforts sustainable. In this first year, the IR directors, all primary contacts, have telescoped from the 10,000 foot view of the assessment forest to bushwhacking through the operational details of the trees and underbrush.

An essential element of this grant is that departments gather to talk specifically about assessment of student learning. During this first year, this needed to occur at two levels: among the faculty participants across the three colleges (Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore) and within the individual departments participating in the grant. While we exchanged email addresses and posted project summaries on the grant website, the primary opportunity for Tri-Co faculty to exchange ideas and share experiences was at our two retreats (Bryn Mawr hosted in September; Haverford hosted in January).

Getting into the nitty-gritty details of putting the conferences together—both programmatically and logistically was a major effort. We structured each retreat to provide some theory, opportunity for practice, and ample time for faculty interaction. If we want these kinds of gatherings to happen outside of a grant, administrative support for such efforts would need to be budgeted institutionally—either within IR or the Provost’s office. As mentioned above, providing this forum and framework for the Tri-Co conversations was logistically challenging, but was noted uniformly by faculty as a most valuable aspect of the project. Faculty responses and their interactions during the retreat sessions demonstrated their willingness to explore various means of learning assessment and to engage in the process for improvement, especially if they feel they are supported in these efforts.

While assessment resources and examples abound on the internet, the terminology varies widely and the three IR Directors had to come to agreement on the conventions to use for the purpose of this grant. We were constantly translating material into concepts, and then into our own conventions for consistency. Some of the most useful items came from institutions quite unlike us. As
a group, liberal arts colleges, especially the ones we most often consider our academic peers, are not assessment leaders. This has made it difficult to incorporate the embraceable “best practices” faculty have said they would like to see. Going forward, perhaps we could target literature search for “essential elements” of best practice, and work to adapt them to our students, faculty, and institutional cultures.

Across participating Tri-Co faculty, the distinction between the more familiar program assessment and assessment of student learning (starting with the articulation of learning goals/objectives) was clearer by the end of year one. While improvement is the purpose of each form of assessment, the lens through which improvement is accomplished is slightly different. Adjusting the initial starting point from “what faculty teach” to “what students are to learn” involves the challenging process of articulating student learning goals and objectives. This was an emphasis of the first retreat. The individual faculty grant participants then became the initiators of departmental conversations about their student learning goals. Reports of these conversations suggested to me that buy-in from colleagues seemed mixed. However, well-crafted objectives suggest measurements (the focus of the second retreat) and are the key to a doable process that directs future improvements.

While year one grant activities focused on faculty ownership of student learning assessment and the development of project loops, the focus for year two will shift to the data collection/measurement phase of the projects and the institutional support/leadership aspects of sustaining student learning assessment. Our initial meeting in January between the Provosts, Associate Provosts, and IR Directors was frank, helpful, and set the stage for our year two focus on the question of how to make assessment of student learning more sustainable in institutionally-specific ways.

Working collaboratively with my IR colleagues at Bryn Mawr and Swarthmore has been personally enjoyable and instructive about the synergy created when individuals with differing gifts and abilities—be it between institutions or within a single institution—work together to improve how we do what we do. Coordinating Tri-Co project expectations and due dates, and sharing “to do” lists with my IR colleagues was helpful in my work with Haverford departments. Sharing among all Tri-Co departmental participants made faculty accountable to faculty as well. During year one of this Teagle grant, I had major accreditation and other projects on my plate, as well as a maternity leave, which meant I tried to guide the departmental participants but was not directly involved in their departmental discussions of goals or measures. I’m not certain whether my presence would have been helpful or invasive. In reality, it was not possible for me to participate in this way, and hopefully the benefit of a faculty-only process has increased buy-in. Two departmental assistants joined our team meetings, offering to assist with data collection once the faculty-determined measures are finalized. This type of administrative support for assessment seems highly appropriate and valuable in making the data accessible for use in the final step of the assessment of student learning process.

With the myriad demands on both faculty and administrators, the intellectual space that this grant created is among its most valuable features. Once assembled for our various conversations (which was by no measure easy), the exchanges reflected a growing understanding of and appreciation for the ways in which assessment helps us help our students learn.
Reflections on year one of the tri-college Teagle grant

The premise of the Teagle project was simple: At each of the three Tri-Co schools, support three academic departments through a narrowly defined assessment project over a three-year period, and use these as case studies to brainstorm ways to "scale up" department-level assessment to the institution as a whole in ways that are sustainable. Facilitating successful experiments with assessment in each of the three departments, and expanding these after the three-year grant period in a kind of "train the trainers" model, was an important secondary goal.

All of which depended, we realized from the outset, on organizing the three-year project in such a way that the faculty participants experienced the assessment exercise as valuable to their professional efforts to improve student learning outcomes. By "valuable" it was not assumed that, after the grant, faculty would necessarily continue regular departmental assessment work without any external incentive or mandate of some sort. The outcome sought was, rather, that these departments would at least be willing to invest some time among other priorities in rigorous assessment of student outcomes, and would be willing to share their experience of its value with other faculty.

IR personnel at each college could not control whether the faculty participants would or would not experience value in their assessment exercise, but we did feel a degree of accountability to this central goal. Specifically, we felt accountable to the goals of helping faculty overcome known obstacles to the work (technical and analytic support, maximizing a sense of common purpose with multi-disciplinary and the Tri-Co structure, overcoming a lack of motivation through examples from other institutions, other departments, etc.), and by communicating effectively about the positive potential of assessment work.

Year One was in many ways a success, as many faculty reported that they found the task of developing departmental learning goals and an assessment plan for one of these goals to be intrinsically valuable. Some faculty were effusive on this point: "designing the assessment caused me to completely change the way I teach the class [that I am assessing learning outcomes for]", said one, while another observed that defining departmental goals had lead to a complete revamping of the introductory course for the major.

This was the general view about the value of the first-year experience – that of defining departmental goals and designing a direct assessment of them proved a valuable experience, both for the faculty participant as well as their department.
That said, the retreat at the beginning of year two of the grant – when faculty participants begin implementing their assessments and collecting data – seemed to highlight some possible speed bumps down the road with respect to faculty experience of value of assessment.

**Academic freedom versus administrative efficiency**

In order for departmental-level assessment to be sustainable at our campuses on a larger scale, it seems obvious that we will have to be smart and efficient about how we use our limited resources of faculty and administrative (institutional research and provostial leadership) staff time. Achieving this efficiency clearly requires some degree of acceptance of standardization of the assessment process, at least at the rudimentary level of steps in the process (goal definition, data collection, data analysis, using data and closing the loop), of developing a common language (learning goals, learning objectives, measurement tools such as rubrics), and of agreeing on appropriate timelines for completing and reviewing each stage.

Some departments participating in the project seemed to chafe more than others under the expectations to standardize the products and processes of the Teagle project. From the IR perspective, developing standard templates, definitions, and timelines is a key facilitative role, and many departments seemed to view it this way. But, as a review of the assessment plans on the Teagle website suggests, some departments were less comfortable fitting their department's efforts into such a standardized template.

Common templates, processes, timelines definitions, etc., are essential in a department-level assessment plan to the extent that faculty and departments utilize administrative staff time, and to the degree that the "products" of the assessment process are to be incorporated into the kind of comprehensive, "systemic" assessment plan that Middle States requires. This is not to say elements of the process cannot be entirely intradepartmental – but a balance between standardization and departmental customization of the process must be struck if a larger-scale implementation is to be sustainable. This is a goal toward which faculty and the administrators that support them in their efforts must continue to strive.

**Observation:**
In retrospect it may have been worthwhile to provide an additional year or six months at the beginning of the grant period to permit faculty to play a more active role in defining the common templates, definitions, and timelines. The IR staff responsible for organizing the project assumed a basic acceptance of and familiarity with assessment terminology, measurement, and logic that was probably less widely held by faculty participants that we initially thought. Instead of "hitting the ground running" so to speak, by having the IR personnel provide the standardized elements of the projects based on the assessment literature, it might have been better to spend some time easing into that literature itself, and letting the group itself define the particular form of this standardization.

Writing that last sentence, however, brought to this author’s mind a comment by one of the faculty participants at the third retreat, paraphrasing: "it is a real luxury for us to be discussing the issue of assessment on its merits, trying to find ways to adapt it to our own institutional cultures, when the rest
of higher education is more or less having to do what they're told." A departmentally customized, fully
decentralized approach to department-level assessment may well be most consistent with our faculty
cultures as they currently exist, but it may not serve the purpose of making the process most efficient
and of demonstrating compliance with external demands for assessment.

"Marginal" role of the IR personnel as leaders on assessment

With apologies to my female counterparts at Swarthmore and Haverford, the term "marginal" here is
used in the sociological sense (faintly recalled from an undergraduate sociology course):

"The marginal man...is one whom fate has condemned to live in two societies and in two, not merely
different, but antagonistic cultures....his mind is the crucible in which two different and refractory
cultures may be said to melt and, either wholly or in part, fuse." [Robert E. Park, 1937]

Though this concept was originally conceived in the effort to understand the psychological effects of
immigration and intergroup relations, I found myself thinking of this somewhat dated concept when I
sat down to write this journalistic summary of the Teagle grant. For the role of the institutional research
(or assessment expert) is in many ways to straddle the "antagonistic" cultures of external regulators,
market forces, and accreditation agencies, and the internal the faculty cultures of our own institutions.
In a real sense, when it comes to assessment of student learning outcomes, our roles "belong" to
neither "society", and yet we must continue to function in both.

I realize that this marginal position is not unique to the IR role on assessment matters. Many
administrators and faculty occupy similar positions at the intersections of different cultures of a variety
of sorts. I merely wish to suggest that this tension is particularly pronounced for the IR role as
"facilitator" of assessment of student learning, and that the concept of marginality may be useful for
understanding it.

This marginal status between the internal faculty culture and the external regulatory and market-based
reality is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, our lack of truly belonging to either culture limits the
authority with which we can speak to either. By "authority" here I do not mean formal line authority
within an administrative hierarchy. The IR office is a staff position, not a supervisory or "line" position,
but in fact it is not clear that any administrative entity – even the Provost's office – has formal line
authority over faculty in the traditional sense of the term on this issue of assessment of student
learning. Rather I refer to authority or legitimacy that derives from group membership, and thus
accountability to decision-making about resource use as it relates to the assessment imperative.

Our marginal membership in external regulatory agencies and bodies, as well as to evolving market
forces in student demand, is what compels IR professionals to communicate to faculty the sense of
urgency about responding to demands for assessment of student learning. The quite legitimate faculty
response is: "easy for you to say." While a deeper institutional commitment here would indeed involve a
shift of work priorities and increasing workload within institutional research offices, whether it is
focused on learning assessment, enrollment management, peer benchmarking, compliance reporting –
it's all still "institutional research" in support of data-driven decision-making. So, point taken: it is "easy for IR folks to say".

For faculty, assessment represents a new responsibility, in addition to the familiar three expectations of teaching, research, and service. One could argue that assessment isn't really a fourth "bucket": and in fact it is part of teaching, it is a kind of research, and it is even a form of service. But these are semantic distinctions – the fact is that it does constitute a new category of responsibility, one that is currently not being met or integrated into our incentive structures for faculty, at least in the terms defined by these regulatory agencies. As such, if this responsibility is truly internalized by faculty – is seen as "intrinsically valuable" – that means a reconceptualization of the faculty role itself.

Which means IR professionals find themselves in the somewhat strange position of advocating for – or at least trying to showcase the potential value of – a non-trivial change in the faculty role, but without any legitimate authority to do so, even the limited authority that might be conferred by group membership.

**Observation:**

It isn't clear that explicating this reality – as the IR personnel attempted to do in the third retreat, by essentially asking faculty and Provosts to "practice leadership" on this issue, changes anything. And I do understand the limits of the Provost’s in effectively "advocating" for this kind of role re-definition either. It is a truism that faculty cannot be told what to do with their time, outside of the tripod of "teaching, research, and service" as traditionally defined. Given our faculty governance structure, it is doubtful that the incentive structure for faculty could be substantially changed in any way that would make this kind of reconceptualization of the faculty role more likely.

Which means we are back to where we started: all depends on faculty seeing the value of this work as part of their professional identity and responsibility.

**Faculty leadership on assessment**

In the preceding, I've described Catch-22: faculty themselves have to endorse an incentive structure to support this work, but faculty legitimately need to see the value of this work before offering any such endorsement.

In retrospect the Teagle project seems as if it were designed specifically as a way out of this Catch-22. Begin with faculty who begin with (at minimum) a hopeful attitude about the potential value of this work, provide them a small monetary incentive to justify the additional workload, support the work administratively though the IR offices, and give it some visibility though the close involvement of the Provosts' offices. Then, once some or all of the participating faculty see the actual or potential value of this kind of work, they would communicate with other faculty, and perhaps begin a larger discussion about how to including assessment responsibilities into individual faculty and departmental incentive structures.
One of the expectations for the faculty participants was to provide an annual report to their wider faculties on the progress of their work. Our discussion of this aspect of the project during the third retreat in September 2010 hinted at some difficulties here. As noted, most faculty participants had by this time reported experiencing significant value in the work of the first, foundation-laying year of the project: developing departmental learning goals and designing assessment plans and measures. Yet all were very reluctant to describe their experience to date to their colleagues in a formal setting (faculty meeting, assessment meeting, etc.). At Haverford and Swarthmore, the Associate Provosts provided a report to a subset of the faculty on behalf of the Teagle faculty participants – at Bryn Mawr the Teagle faculty participated in a general discussion of student learning assessment, but their activities were not foregrounded.

What we heard from faculty at the retreat was some version of the following, "I cannot stand before my colleagues up and endorse the value of this work until I have evidence that it is indeed valuable." The broad experience of value during the first phase – developing learning goals, measures, etc. – was not perceived as sufficient. Rather, there was broad agreement between the faculty participants and their provostial representatives that they would need to see the results of the measures and data to be able to speak about their experience.

I think it is worth drawing out the implications of this moment in the work of the grant.

**Advocacy versus description**

It became clear following the retreat that part of the explanation for faculty reluctance was explained by an apparent perception that this communication with other faculty about the Teagle work was supposed to take the form of *advocacy* as opposed to *description*. Even as the IR personnel were very explicit about the task being descriptive only, it seems clear that at least some of the faculty participants must have experienced this expectation as one of "forced advocacy."

On the assumption that this was the perception of at least some faculty, we will have to be clear that the intent is to provide a true rendering of the faculty participant experience, warts and all. It is indeed very likely that several assessment projects will "fail" in the narrow sense that they do not adequately test the learning goals, or are not conclusive, etc. That is also worth sharing, however. We can learn more from open sharing of failures as we can from successes.

In any case my own evolving sense of this work of assessing learning outcomes at the departmental level is that the "product" of the work itself – a tightly designed study point toward areas that need improvement, a data-driven change to an introductory course, a rubric-based change to the expectations for the senior thesis – will, in the end, be much less important than understandings that develop at the margins of the work itself.

It will be important going forward to attend to the ancillary or indirect benefits of the work, both within the departments of the participating faculty and beyond them. Does the work lead to a rethinking of one's goals in the classroom? Does it lend greater clarity and transparency to grading procedures? Does
the effort to be more declarative about learning goals facilitate departmental discussions about resource allocation, requests for new resources in useful ways.

In the end, as with "student learning" itself at our kind of liberal arts institution, I believe that the most important outcomes of this grant will of this indirect variety. In our institutional mission statements we all lay claim to broad learning goals for students that defy direct measurement in addition to more concrete skills such as quantitative literacy, effective writing and oral communication, etc. Why would this be any different for faculty engaging in the assessment of these learning outcomes for students? In others words, why would we expect the "outcomes" of assessment work to be narrowly confined to the data generated by our direct measures of students? If there is real value in this work for faculty, I would submit that it is likely to be found in the ongoing, sustained effort to measure what we want students to learn, rather than in any tangible outcomes of those efforts (research reports, curricular changes, etc.).

Value versus difficulty

This moment in the grant may suggest a more troubling possibility. It is certain that many of the projects will initiate (or re-initiate) departmental conversations that are difficult to have, that stir up interpersonal issues that we would rather avoid, and so on. This is in fact one of the key virtues of good assessment practice – it provides a language (common goals) around which departments can have difficult conversations about resource use, curriculum design, grading, and the like.

But the "value" of these kinds of conversations are almost certainly long-term in nature; short-term, they may provoke discomfort and conflict. While it is reassuring that most Teagle participants experienced value in Year one of the project, if anything it is "when the data come in" on the assessment project that the potential for discomfort and conflict will peak. Not in all departments, of course, but surely in some participating departments the sharing of the data will be a sensitive moment.

How will the faculty participants interpret this kind of conflict/challenge vis a vis the "value" of the Teagle assessment project? Again, if the assumption is that faculty must only share "positive" stories of their Teagle experience, then the collective likelihood of them being willing to do so at this later stage is probably even lower than it is now. The extent to which faculty participants experience this stage of the work as "valuable" may depend less on their experience of the work at that moment than on a leap of faith that the work and the difficult discussion it raises will in the long-term be valuable.

The worry, then, is that faculty remain unwilling to make this "leap of faith" regarding the long-term value of the work throughout the project. Or that, even without this leap of faith about long-term value, faculty remain unwilling to describe their work – warts and all – to their colleagues.

Value as a relative term

Another possible reason for faculty reluctance to speak to their colleagues about assessment work may have to do with where they rank it relative to their other responsibilities. There are many valuable things one could do with one's time, but time is a finite quantity, which means prioritization. If the institutional allocation of resources to academic departments or to individual faculty is not "data-driven"
in any meaningful way that relates to student learning outcomes, why would a rational actor ever measure student outcomes? Put another way: if the only reward for adopting a self-critical stance on whether one is producing intended student learning outcomes is an intrinsic sense of fulfilling one’s professional role and perhaps of helping the institution meet its regulatory obligations, why would faculty engage in this work?
Teagle Systematic Improvement Grant
Sustainable Departmental-Level Assessment of Student Learning
Year One Reflections
Robin H. Shores
Institutional Research, Swarthmore College

As part of our work this first year for our Tri-College Teagle -Systematic Improvement grant, we have held two retreats (meetings of all participants), ten Tri-College Institutional Research (IR) meetings, a Tri-College Provost-IR meeting, two Swarthmore full team meetings, three Swarthmore Department team-IR meetings, occasional phone calls, and countless email exchanges. It has been a productive year, with a lot of learning and planning.

Collaborating with my IR colleagues has been a real highlight. While we knew each other before this project, actually working together has been a very different and delightful experience. My respect for these smart, hard-working people is greater than ever. A real benefit has been simply the increased opportunities to exchange observations, and share ideas about dealing with the touchy topic of assessment at our campuses. We have learned together and from each other. We are much more comfortable than before contacting each other for advice about how to deal with assessment-related issues, how to provide support, or even how to tactfully nudge a faculty member who seems to be heading in an unproductive direction.

Planning the retreats was challenging, and took the bulk of IR time in this first year. The hardest part was simply coordinating the schedules of 9 faculty members! It simply couldn’t be done, and someone would always have to miss part or all of a meeting. We would like to have had more time for our meetings, but it wasn’t possible. On one hand, I was grateful that Swarthmore’s departments had involved two faculty members each, to provide coverage. On the other hand, that meant there were that many more schedules to try to puzzle together. I honestly don’t know if it made things harder or easier. The other challenge, of course, was to develop programming that would inform participants who were all at different levels of understanding about assessment. We opted to begin with the basics, which was a good decision. Better to have a few bored than any lost. We spent a lot of time at our planning meetings debating, rearranging, questioning, volunteering to learn more, and crossing our fingers.

Our first retreat focused on sharing information about the fundamentals of assessment. Our guest was Dr. Charles Blaich from the Center of Inquiry at Wabash College. Dr. Blaich discussed teaching practices and their effects on student outcomes, taking us through an exercise that generated good discussion. It was clear from the first meeting that participants greatly valued these opportunities for discussion and interaction. We conducted follow-up surveys (after each retreat) which corroborated this observation. The faculty participants also clearly hunger to hear from outside experts who have “been there, done that.” I don’t think we (IR directors) have been able to totally convince them that they are now among the pioneers in assessment at colleges like ours. Other sectors seem to be well ahead of small, selective, liberal arts colleges in conducting assessment. We discussed having outside speakers for our second retreat in January, but in the end opted to use much of our limited time together for small and large group discussion, with some time set aside to review the concept of rubrics which had appeared in quite a few of the project ideas. I suspect that few faculty participants were inclined to use rubrics (or perhaps even
knew what they were) when we started this process, and so this was an interesting development. That presentation also generated good discussion. Our planning for our Fall 2010 retreat will also face the dilemma of whether to use some of our limited time for an outside speaker.

On campus it was slow going to get the projects articulated. The participants found their departmental discussions about student learning goals to be somewhat challenging, which slowed things down some. But it was also difficult for them to find time in their busy schedules to focus on developing their plans. When we met all together, our discussions were always engaging, and participants were clearly interested in their projects and those of the other departments, but other responsibilities often kept attention away from working out the details of their ideas and plans. The faculty participants from one of our departments represented a third of their small department (and one was chair). During the year their department underwent an external review, they hosted an outside speaker for a multi-college event, they were involved in a faculty search within their department and one for another department, sat on several key institutional committees, and they also managed to submit a grant proposal. I wondered more than once why they’d volunteered for this additional project! Fortunately, they had already been doing some interesting related work and had thought carefully about learning goals, and so they could hit the ground running. Their final plan looks promising, and I have no doubt they will be fine ambassadors, once they catch their breath!

Swarthmore’s faculty has come to understand, if not exactly embrace, assessment from a totally self-driven process. It was a faculty-only committee that developed the College’s Assessment Plan in 2006, and the processes they outlined greatly respect departmental autonomy. We have only this year even offered a template for annual departmental reports - which departments “may choose to use.” So I probably shouldn’t have been surprised that our departmental teams in the end wrote up their projects in ways that generally bore little similarity to the examples we’d so carefully developed for them! I’m thrilled that our faculty takes ownership of assessment, and that the grant participants are approaching their projects so thoughtfully and in ways that make sense given their needs. But it does make it harder for me to be sure that they’re including and understanding all the elements needed to make it a meaningful assessment.

As for IR “leadership” in this project at Swarthmore, whether it’s just our way of doing things or our particular personalities as participants, like most projects here, this is a collaborative effort. If there is leadership on the part of IR, it is leadership through service. Aside from nagging about deadlines and providing information or tools they may not be familiar with, my approach has essentially been to offer objective feedback and full IR support in accomplishing what the faculty participants want to accomplish with their projects. About midway through the year our Tri-Co IR group explicitly decided that encouraging our faculty participants to embrace assessment was more important than rigidly following rules and guidelines. A project that is a pretty good example of assessment by an enthusiastic faculty member is far preferable to a perfect project from a reluctant one. I believe that the proposed projects are all meaningful to the participants and their departments, and will provide all of us good learning experiences.
Meetings

**IR Tri-College meetings for planning**
6/26/09 at Bryn Mawr
7/31/09 by conference call
8/20/09 at Swarthmore
9/2/09 at Haverford
10/5/09 at Bryn Mawr
11/17/09 at Haverford
12/16/09 at Swarthmore
1/11/10 at Bryn Mawr
1/25/10 at Swarthmore (briefly, following Provost/IR meeting)
2/9/10 at Bryn Mawr

**Provost-IR Tri-College meeting**
1/25/10 at Swarthmore

**Retreats for All participants**
9/11/09
1/26/10

**Swarthmore Team Meetings**
10/26/09
3/25/10

**Swarthmore Department-IR Meetings**
2/24/10 English Literature
3/16/10 Educational Studies
5/4/10 Computer Science