During the 2009-2010 academic year, three Swarthmore College departments participated in the first year of the Teagle funded project, *Beyond the Accreditation Self-Study*. The three departments, Educational Studies, English Literature, and Computer Science, were chosen from a group of departments that volunteered to be a part of the project. Two faculty members represented each department at Teagle Tri-College and Swarthmore College meetings; in all three departments the representatives were senior faculty members, and in all three, one of the two was the chair of the department. These faculty members took primary responsibility for introducing and shepherding the project through their departments during this first year. Their commitment and engagement were significant in their departments, in college meetings, and in the Tri-College meetings hosted at Bryn Mawr and Haverford.

Faculty participants began the process in their departments by engaging colleagues in brainstorming sessions about possible assessment loops. All three departments discovered that they needed to devote a significant amount of time to articulating and clarifying student learning goals. All seemed to agree that this process alone, even before designing assessment loops, was valuable; while departments have common expectations and goals, these are often unarticulated. Conversations around goals and expectations for content and skill learning allowed (perhaps forced?) colleagues to explore what they really hoped to accomplish with their students and what their expected learning outcomes would be.

Faculty participants also discovered and had to work with some resistance from their departmental colleagues. Although departments had agreed to participate, when faculty found they had to devote some department meeting time to the project, some faculty found it difficult to see how the time invested in the project would benefit themselves, their students, or the department as a whole. Faculty participants had to work with other departmental colleagues to shape projects that were focused enough to be seen as manageable (in terms of time and commitment) by their colleagues. Faculty participants ultimately placed the largest burden of the work on themselves (drafting goals, designing the assessment loops, clarifying the process) even though they drew on departmental input and feedback in the process.

On-campus and Tri-College meetings with other faculty and staff engaged in this project provided important stimulus and support for Swarthmore’s faculty. These regular meetings gave the faculty participants deadlines to meet, opportunities to share their work and get feedback on their plans, and a chance to hear from colleagues about common roadblocks and stressors involved in doing this kind of department level assessment. These meetings also provided the Swarthmore staff involved in the project (Director of
Institutional Research and Associate Provost) with guidance and information about the process. For example, at a meeting in spring 2010, faculty participants discussed how best to inform the broader faculty community at Swarthmore about their work. They decided that a brief report this spring followed by presentations of more complete work the following year would be the best way to share their experiences with their colleagues (acknowledging that colleagues would be more willing and able to engage with these ideas next year than they would in late spring).

The three components of the project that seem to have made it successful so far at Swarthmore, then, appear to be:

1. The involvement of senior faculty who have the ability to be heard in their departments and the willingness to be flexible in balancing departmental needs and dynamics and project requirements;
2. A community of support that provides deadlines, guidance, shared gripe sessions, and information that can be used immediately in the project; and
3. An interactive process between direct project participants (faculty) and staff (Institutional Research and Provost’s office) so that faculty members’ ideas and input can be heard and responded to at the institutional level.

It seems important to continue to work on exploring/clarifying with faculty (both participants and others) that the work that goes into these projects will have enough “payoff;” that these formal approaches of clarifying goals and creating explicit assessment loops provide significantly more, or at least more valuable, information than the processes currently being used by departments. We may not have this information until the end of the three year project, but faculty participants’ response to this question will determine whether or not this approach to departmental assessment can and will be transferred to other academic departments at the end of the grant period.

We look forward to the next year of the project.
My role on this project has been two-fold—as the faculty representative from a participating department (Psychology), I have been engaged in discussions with the Tri-College Teagle participants all year, and have brought those discussions into my department, where my colleagues and I have devised assessment projects that serve the needs of the department. My role as an institutional representative has been to continue the department level and Tri-college discussions with the Provost, with the goal of institutionalizing some of the ideas that have arisen from the project.

I have also carried out other specific roles on the project. I have helped to shepherd the assessment projects of my colleagues, by meeting with faculty members from a participating department that needed further convincing about the purpose and value of assessment. Having been involved in assessment activities for several years as the Co-Chair of the Middle States Reaccreditation Review (as well as co-chair of the Working Group on Assessment), I have had a great deal of experience working in the model of the “assessment loop”. Conversations with participating departments (including my own) have helped other faculty members to understand the process of useful assessment, as we have worked on assessment loops tailored to specific assessment questions.

I also reported back to the Faculty at its May 2010 meeting, and I have served as a mediator between the faculty participants and the administrative and academic support staff assigned to the project.

My institutional perspective regarding assessment was broadened in October 2009, when I attended the Teagle Foundation Assessment Conference at Duke University. In addition to making numerous connections with individuals grappling with student learning assessment issues at Colleges and Universities all over the country, there were several important take away messages. Here are just a few examples:

- Faculty must take ownership of assessment issues—top down approaches are not appreciated or understood, and are largely ineffective
- Collaboration on assessment projects is often very effective, strong leadership in articulating the value of assessment is crucial
- Multiple methods of assessment are necessary, given the flawed nature of many assessment tools
- There need to be effective structures for assessment, assessment officers, for example (perhaps drawn from the faculty or academic support staff), help lead these conversations at many institutions

The notion of reframing assessment as an inquiry-based process, as “evidence-based decision-making” resonated deeply with me. We accept no less than this level
of rigor in our personal and professional lives. Our teaching and students’ learning should be open to the same levels of scrutiny. One specific example of an assessment technique that could readily be implemented at Haverford is to develop an end-of-semester course evaluation for use as a tool for student learning assessment. In the Provost’s Office, we are continuing to discuss possible implementation strategies to collect a uniform set of student learning assessment data. One key question to be addressed is whether results of these assessments are shared with senior administration, department chairs, or students. Also of concern is the use of such data during tenure and promotion review cases.

Institutional challenges to establishing and maintaining a culture of assessment revolve around time pressures among faculty, and the resistance to change that is characteristic of most campus cultures. As change is brewing at Haverford, however, in the ongoing implementation of our academic strategic plan, it is an ideal time to raise these issues. Making assessment projects part of an expanded role for department chairs (with the first ever implementation of compensation for service as department chair) could be a reasonable first step in institutionalizing assessment practices more systematically.

The faculty has been engaged in a discussion of our institutional learning goals (the April and May faculty meetings included discussions of the “Educational Goals and Aspirations” that were first developed during our Middle States Reaccreditation process). These are now posted at the Provost’s webpage (www.haverford.edu/provost/). Any assessment project begins with a statement of learning goals. The recent focus on institutional level goals will help faculty members consider department-level and course-level learning goals as well.