As the Institutional Representative from the Haverford Provost’s Office, I am pleased to submit this reflective report on the Teagle Learning Assessment project at the end of Year 2 of the grant.

During this second year of the grant period, the departmental representatives have worked to generate useful assessment data, through both direct and indirect assessment means. The projects have been refined by frequent meetings among the core group of faculty members, each of whom reports productive discussions and planning efforts within their home departments. Even the most reluctant departmental colleagues have begun to see the value in the projects and are looking forward to “closing the loop” by putting the results of assessment projects into action.

In my role as Provost’s Office representative to the Teagle project, I have primary responsibility for bringing the Provost into discussions regarding student learning assessment, and have made progress towards the formalization of assessment responsibilities as part of the profile of academic department chair responsibilities. Looking ahead to 2011-2012, it will be an official request from the Provost’s Office (together with the Institutional Effectiveness Committee, see below) that each academic department draft a coherent set of departmental student learning goals, to be located on each department’s website. In the long term, it will be the explicit responsibility of the department chair to oversee and report on departmental efforts to assess student learning, consonant with the department’s agreed upon learning goals (of course, we expect that reaching consensus on department wide learning goals will take some time to achieve). An ongoing effort to regularize compensation for serving as Department Chair (set to be fully integrated into the budget for FY13) coincides with our plans to enhance the Department Chair role. We believe that this fortuitous timing aligns well with the plans to enhance the responsibilities of the Department Chair.

To preview the work that will be expected during next academic year, one of the other Teagle participating faculty and I made a presentation about our student learning assessment projects at the meeting of Department Chairs that took place in March 2011. We shared the results of the Psychology project and the ongoing efforts of the History Department to construct a meaningful rubric for the senior thesis project that will allow History Departmental faculty members to assess the extent to which their students, through the summative senior thesis project, have achieved the learning goals of the department’s curriculum. The History Department members uniformly report two aspects of this initiative that were particularly valuable. First, the department benefitted from the experience of working together to craft their learning goals. Second, they found the process of having to articulate how the thesis project illustrates the achievement of standards
of excellence for particular aspirations to be a useful exercise in itself for clarifying
departmental goals and objectives. In fact, a few days after the Department Chairs
meeting, the Chair of the Philosophy Department reported that she had begun the
conversation with her colleagues regarding shared learning goals. It continues to be
our observation that despite initial reluctance, faculty members who engage with
their colleagues in this sort of reflection regarding the aspirations of their
curriculum, find it to be a valuable experience.

The request, moving forward, for Department Chairs to lead efforts in student
learning assessment will be facilitated by the Institutional Effectiveness Committee,
a newly established (Fall 2010) committee, reporting directly to the President,
whose primary function is to help coordinate assessment efforts across the College.
During its inaugural year, the committee focused primarily on Institutional
Assessment. During the next academic year, the focus will shift towards Student
Learning Assessment. Together with the “departmental learning goals” project
described above, the IE Committee will take the lead on helping the Provost’s Office
better utilize the end-of-semester course evaluation for student learning assessment
purposes. Currently, we have no common system for evaluating courses, but believe
that a more uniform process that includes crucial questions regarding student
learning assessment can provide the Provost’s Office with better institutional data
about student learning. We have already implemented changes in the Senior Exit
Interview to better assess success in achieving some of our “College-Wide” learning
goals (articulated during our Middle States review self-study).

Supporting assessment efforts continues to be a challenge, and will be even more so
once Department Chairs engage more frequently in assessment projects. However,
the Provost’s Office had recently re-designed a research analyst position that
reports to the Provost to take on more assessment related work. With this position,
together with the Institutional Effectiveness Committee, the College has significantly
expanded its capacity for undertaking such projects.

In short, the steps taken alongside of the work sponsored by the Teagle Foundation
are slowly making assessment a more visible and valued part of the Haverford
College culture. We look forward to continuing this work in 11-12 and beyond.
During the 2010-2011 academic year, Swarthmore College participation in the Teagle project, *Beyond the Accreditation Self-Study*, yielded some very positive results. The three departments involved in the project, Computer Science, Educational Studies, and English Literature, carried out assessment projects, met with tri-college colleagues and among themselves to discuss progress, and shared their experiences-in-progress with other members of the Swarthmore College community. The faculty involved in the project agree that they have learned a great deal about assessment and about their own departments’ goals and programs.

The year began with a Tri-College meeting on September 13, 2010 at Swarthmore College. During this meeting, faculty from each institution met with others doing similar kinds of assessment projects (focused on research and writing, on capstone experiences, and on embedded assessment respectively) to share their plans for the year. Questions and suggestions from colleagues provided useful feedback as the department representatives prepared to implement the assessment plans designed the year before. Another session at this meeting focused on institutional processes and strategies that might be used to support ongoing assessment projects at the three colleges. While faculty seemed less engaged in this discussion, the ideas that emerged were useful for administrators concerned with sustaining assessment practice beyond the grant period.

The Swarthmore departments met again in late October to discuss project progress. Again, faculty appreciated the opportunity to get feedback, to problem solve with peers, and to figure out next steps. As reported last year, all faculty involved reported some resistance to the work involved from departmental colleagues and explained that they (with IR support) were doing most of the work on the projects. We agreed at this meeting that the three departments would report work in progress at a lunch meeting in the spring to which all Swarthmore faculty would be invited.

The Tri-College faculty and provost representatives met again at Bryn Mawr College on February 4, 2011. At this meeting, three departments, one from each institution, presented their projects, allowing the groups to provide models for the other departments and, again, to receive feedback. Given that many of the projects across the three campuses use rubrics, the meeting also included a short workshop on developing effective rubrics. The group also discussed the resources being used to support the projects, in particular the time and expertise of our institutional research staffs.

The highlight of the year at Swarthmore was a presentation by the three participating departments to a group of colleagues from across the college. All faculty were invited to join the group for lunch, and each department was asked to ensure that one member of
every department be represented. Approximately 30 people attended the presentation, including the current provost and the newly appointed provost, who will assume the position July 1, 2011. Lisa Smulyan, Associate Provost, provided an overview of the project. Each department then presented its project, describing the processes used to clarify or identify student learning goals, design an assessment to measure success in reaching some subset of those goals, and collect and begin to analyze data. All three departments emphasized the value of the process as well as the information that had begun to emerge from it; all three pointed out that the process had already led to changes in courses or programs as a result of conversations, clarifications, and initial results. In addition, all three departments pointed out the central role that the institutional research staff had played in helping them design the project and collect and analyze data. The presentation was very well received by those present, and some discussion ensued about possible structures to support an ongoing process of departmental assessment based on this model. One suggestion, for example, was the possibility of having three departments enter this cycle each year, with support from the Provost’s office and Institutional Research and reporting responsibilities to the Provost’s Office.

Next year, the three departments will conclude their studies and use the data collected and analyzed to examine current practice. We expect that this process will, essentially, close the loop on these projects and, simultaneously, suggest questions for a new round of assessments. We will work to ensure that our college Assessment Committee and the new provost are informed of our progress and make use of our findings as they consider possibilities for institutionalizing some of what we have learned about department based assessment.

Lisa Smulyan
Associate Provost
Provost’s Summary for Teagle Project for Academic Year 2010-2011
June 10, 2011

In this report, I will focus less on the details of the grant activities and more on what I consider to be some of the lessons that we learned this year.

In October, 2010 at the bi-monthly meeting for department chairs (about 30 chairs in attendance), we held a small group discussion of assessment. We divided into three groups and each group contained a member of a department that was participating in the Teagle grant. All members of the group shared with each other their department’s plans for assessment that year, but there was particular interest in the activities of the Teagle grant participants, and they wound up sharing more fully about their projects. The important developments from these discussions included:

- Thoughtful articulation of the challenge of measuring some of the most important learning outcomes in our courses, e.g., critical thinking, excellent writing and evidence-based argument construction. The discussion of these challenges was important in confirming that the point of assessment is to try to measure these outcomes and not simply reduce assessment to only the things that are easy to measure like factual knowledge. This discussion was an excellent opportunity to review/revise/remind faculty of the point or goal of assessment of student learning at our institution.

- Colleagues who expressed negative views of assessment early in the conversation because they feel it is a waste of precious time, became intrigued by the good work of the Teagle grant departments. So the skeptical colleagues began to ask lots of questions about the details of the Teagle project and what they might learn from it. What ensued was a very lively discussion of particular approaches to assessment and how they had worked in our environment. Subsequent to the meeting (and totally initiated by the faculty), faculty exchanged different assessment instruments (e.g., rubrics and mid-semester feedback forms) with one and other.

- Overall, it just seemed that as an academic community, we were much more capable of having a substantive discussion of assessment. Compared to a Chair’s meeting a few years earlier, where people simply expressed loathing for the idea of assessment without much thoughtful engagement of the topic, this discussion (while not always gung-ho assessment) felt much more like a conversation that could help us to understand how assessment needs to work at a campus like ours in order for it be useful and get faculty buy-in. There was honest dialogue about the challenges and an openness to considering the opportunities for growth, learning and improvement by engaging with the process.

During the rest of the year, I participated in several other discussions related to the Teagle grant, some involving our TriCo partners and some among the Teagle grant participants on our own campus. I offer here more observations:
Faculty report over and over and in different ways that one of the most important assessment activities is the articulation of learning goals. The mere articulation of these goals makes them more thoughtful in their approach to teaching and more deliberate in their engagement with student learning. It changes how and what they teach for the better, even if they never measure anything. Many seem to feel that this step alone makes assessment “worth it.”

The process of articulating learning goals is also useful at the departmental level. Over and over, I have heard faculty report that these were among the best conversations that they have even had within their departments. These conversations have brought clarity and focus (and revision in response) to the departmental curriculum.

Cross-departmental and cross-institutional conversations are extremely valuable. Initially I thought that a key outcome of the grant would be that we would exchange assessment practices and maybe even develop common systems, and there would be a certain efficiency in this. As expected, sharing of best practices and ideas has been very useful and important. However, these cross-conversations have also pointed out to me the strong influence of departmental and institutional cultures in shaping our approach to assessment. What works in one place, doesn’t always translate to another, and there is some resistance to that transfer. Yet, the value of the conversation about practices across institutions and department still remains. These conversations do result in growth, but not in a straightforward, transfer of practices way.

I am looking forward to next year’s grant activities and the opportunity to build on the important progress that we made this year. In particular, I look forward to using what we have learned so far to further develop our approach to assessment of student learning in ways that support it fully and make it sustainable over the long term.

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