



# Grants that Support Learning Outcomes Assessment

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# I. METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH PARAMETERS

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## Project Challenge

A public research university located in the Northeast approached the Council with the following questions:

*What are the details of the Teagle Foundation grants given for the purpose of assessing learning outcomes? How do the results of this assessment help universities improve pedagogy?*

## Sources

- Advisory Board's internal and online ([www.advisory.com](http://www.advisory.com)) research libraries
- Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) <http://www.eric.ed.gov>
- The Chronicle of Higher Education <http://chronicle.com>
- The Teagle Foundation <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/>

## Research Parameters

- As requested by the member, Council research focused solely on grants from the Teagle Foundation. Thus, this research brief is not meant as an exhaustive study of grants given for the purpose of measuring learning outcomes, but instead to provide detail about a set of specific grants. In addition, we spoke with College D where the Center of Inquiry consults with colleges and universities to gather longitudinal data and conduct learning outcomes assessment.
- To learn about the grants, the Council contacted the Teagle Foundation to obtain the contact information for each principle investigator (PI). Because all grants were given to a consortium of colleges and universities, the PI was not necessarily at the institution that the member requested we speak with. In these cases, we tried to speak with the PI as well as a contact at the institution of interest.
- Depending on the institution, some grant periods are not yet completed and therefore the institution has not implemented plans for pedagogical improvements. In these cases, the Council profiled only the specific details of the grant and any preliminary planning the institution has conducted to address faculty training and support based on assessment results.

# I. METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH PARAMETERS

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<b>A Guide to Universities Profiled in this Brief</b>			
<b>University</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Classification</b>	<b>Enrollment (Total/ Undergrad.)</b>
<b>University A</b>	City; Large	4-year; Private	9,844 / 4,207
<b>College B</b>	City; Small	4-year; Private	1,989/ 1,784
<b>College C</b>	Suburb; Large	4-year; Private	1,583
<b>College D</b>	Town; Distant	4-year; Private	917

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

## II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Introduction

As a result of conversations with university leaders, the Teagle Foundation offers grants that support faculty-driven, ground-up assessment of student learning. Specifically, the foundation believes that “sustained and appropriate assessment” is a driving factor behind ensuring a quality education. The purpose of the grants is broad in scope ranging from assessing math and quantitative literacy to assessing the extent to which diversity learned in the classroom extends to student actions outside of academia.

### Key Observations

**While universities contacted have not yet made significant changes to instruction or curriculum based on assessment findings, all contacts stress the importance of using data to guide pedagogy.**

Data-driven assessment is commonly known to be an effective driver of pedagogical change yet it is not common that faculty and administrators use data on a broad scale to assess the strengths and weakness of faculty, classes, and the overarching mission of the university. The barriers to conducting data-driven assessment are not due to the lack of information - annual surveys both internal and national in nature provide a wealth of data – but instead result from a lack of resources and leadership. Small grants, led by faculty - such as those provided by the Teagle Foundation - provide the funding and thus the accountability to ensure that data is analyzed and used to measure the extent to which a university is affording students with the level and type of education they strive provide.

**Typically, Teagle Grants that measure outcomes and assessment are given to a consortium of colleges and universities as opposed to a single institution.** The collaborative nature of the Teagle grants affords institutions the advantages of sharing resources (e.g., grant support) and also gives them a “thought partner” with which to discuss the most effective strategies each institution should employ to assess the targeted outcome. Contacts at smaller institutions note that the logistical aspect of grant support is especially useful given their own limited resources.

**While Teagle grants are given for a specific purpose (e.g, to assess students’ oral communication skills), the information gleaned from the assessment can be used to address issues with a larger scope.** Outcomes assessment is often viewed as a tool that provides insight into the link between classroom learning and the overall mission of the institution, and a liberal arts education in general. For example, assessing students’ oral communication skills is possible only by looking at a specific set of classes intended to prepare students for oral speaking, but the success of these classes relates to the mission of a liberal arts education which includes guiding students to develop a vast skill set. Therefore, strengthening individual skill sets can lead to a more satisfactory fulfillment of an institution’s mission and that of a liberal arts education.

**Faculty-driven outcomes assessment can be more effective than conducting learning assessments at the administrative level.** All grants given by the Teagle Foundation for the purpose of outcomes assessment must be faculty-driven. This means that the assessment and subsequent initiatives to address findings must be coordinated and implemented largely by faculty. Involvement at the bottom-up level is important to the success of any initiative primarily because it provides faculty (the practitioners) the opportunity to buy-in to the assessment and then to the ensuing initiatives to strengthen pedagogy where necessary.

### III. PROFILES: COLLEGE C

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#### Summary

**Title:** Diversity of Thought, Diversity in Practice: Assessing Student Learning and Engagement

**Total Funds Granted:** \$24,990 over 12 months (planning grant)

**Summary:** Like many liberal arts colleges, College C believes the integration of students' classroom learning with their everyday lives as a key indicator of a successful liberal education. They wish to assess the extent to which this occurs on their campuses and propose to anchor their study in issues related to diversity because of its relevance to both colleges' missions. The collaborative will begin by gathering this data (for example, about courses taught, diversity surveys completed, and student behavior) and consulting with various on-campus groups. They will meet to share best practices, as well as current strategies and results, to establish a common base from which to plan steps forward. A consultant will help hone focus on those approaches to diversity that the colleges will assess, especially with regard to their effectiveness in affecting student behavior beyond the classroom. A second gathering will convene administrators, faculty, students, and an assessment consultant to help generate ideas for an improved assessment strategy. The remainder of the project will be spent crafting the actual strategy.

*Source: Teagle Foundation*

#### Overview

For some time, College C has been interested in assessing the extent to which classroom learning affects students' lives outside of academics. Specifically, the college is interested in measuring how the philosophical ideas behind *diversity* affect behavior outside of the classroom. This behavior is necessary to link to the mission of the college and to the general mission of liberal arts education. While a subsequent grant will support the actual assessment of diversity (as discussed below), the current grant from the Teagle Foundation supports the planning for this assessment.

#### Use of Grant

The majority of the funds provided through the planning grant have been used by faculty and administrators involved with the project to travel between College C and the other college awarded the grant to engage in planning discussions regarding what the larger outcomes assessment project will entail. In addition, both groups traveled to College D to meet with a consultant who works with colleges and universities to gather longitudinal data and conduct learning outcomes assessment (see page 12 for more information).

Through their conversations, faculty at the two institutions decided to measure diversity through administering a pre- and post- attitudinal survey to students who are in "diversity classes" (those courses that teach or focus on some aspect of diversity). The results of these surveys will be given to the appropriate faculty and a discussion of how to strengthen areas of weakness will ensue.

### III. PROFILES: COLLEGE C

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#### Measurement Tools

Contacts note that there are several surveys that, either in whole or part, measure diversity. Examples include:

Survey	Administered By
“Campus Diversity Survey”	Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania
“Openness to Diversity”	In conjunction with Wabash University
“National Survey of Student Engagement” (NSSE)	Indiana University, Bloomington

#### Grant Administration

College C does not have a full-time assessment "guru" to help coordinate assessment efforts, and thus all grant support was provided by the faculty. As contacts explain, “faculty get together and work intensely on the project while still being flexible [to meet their other obligations].” To encourage participation in this grant (and others), College C provides release time to engaged faculty.

#### Additional grant support includes:

- **Grant Writer:** An English professor with grant writing experience
- **Grant Coordinator:** A half-time grant coordinator in the business office supports some aspects of implementation
- **Summer Fellows:** Approximately 70 students spend part of the summer on campus in a Summer Fellows program. These students help with the data collection process associated with the grant.

Lastly, contacts note the importance of sharing resources (e.g., grant support personnel) between the institutions in the grant consortium.

#### Next Steps

College C is in the process of applying for a subsequent grant that will allow them (working in coordination with four other universities) to put the diversity assessment plan (see above) into action. While all institutions will comment on and have the opportunity to edit the proposal before it is sent to the Teagle Foundation for review, contacts at College C comment that they have been proactive in taking the lead on the proposal so that much of the language and initial direction is coming from their institution and thus reflects their needs.

#### Addressing Pedagogy

While specific responses to the outcomes assessment have not yet been outlined, faculty at the two institutions have discussed the need to apply a "quick fix" in areas where the assessment shows a weakness in pedagogy. Specifically, contacts note that there is not always a need to convene a committee and spend large amounts of time strategizing about how to best address a particular problem, and that instead universities can often take immediate action. For example, in some cases pedagogy can be strengthened by speaking directly with a faculty member who can then make short term changes to his/her teaching or curriculum with the hope that long term changes will follow.

### III. PROFILES: COLLEGE B

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#### Summary

**Title:** Value-Added Assessment of Programs of Intense Student-Faculty Interaction: Developing Intentional Learners

**Total Funds Granted:** \$300,000 over 36 months

**Summary:** Bringing together five private liberal arts colleges and universities, the collaborative will explore whether and how selected programs foster both program-specific goals and the broader liberal arts goal of educating students to be active and intentional learners, able to integrate disparate kinds of information in different contexts for different purposes. Collectively and separately, the institutions will develop tools to assess various programs of intense student-faculty interaction: first-year seminars, lower- and upper-level writing-intensive courses (College B), capstone courses and student-faculty research, freshman orientation and first-year seminar, and first-year core and senior capstone courses. Using national and local surveys, direct assessment of student work, and focus groups, the collaborative will develop assessment protocols compatible with the personal, student-oriented environment of the liberal arts college.

*Source: Teagle Foundation*

#### Overview

All five schools in the consortium are assessing the longitudinal success of activities that, as a result of a low student-to-faculty ratio, require a close student-faculty relationship. “Activities” include classroom teaching, research, and study abroad (the assessment focuses primarily on classroom learning). Through assessing the learning outcomes of activities where faculty and students work closely, institutions hope to look at the broader issue of “intentional learning” or, in other words, students’ ability to learn and progress.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, this grant allows participating institutions to assess the extent to which they are providing students with an education that aligns with the mission of a liberal arts education. At College B, these outcomes will be assessed as they relate to the acquisition and development of writing skills.

Currently in the third year of the grant, funding is provided over a four-year timeframe which includes an initial one-year planning period.

#### Measurement Tools

There are three primary methods universities will employ to assess the success of activities that involve a close faculty-to-student working relationship: surveying students in targeted classes, administering a common essay to limited populations of students, and conducting focus groups. In general, contacts feel that when assessing learning outcomes, it is best to ask students straight forward questions that require opinionated, explanatory answers.

- 1. Survey Students:** Using NSSE, College B chose questions that measure 14 explicit learning objectives that relate to the general goals of a liberal arts education. Administered to students in writing classes, the questions provide insight into areas such as the ability to:

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to “Our Students Best Work” published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) for a discussion of intentional learning and measuring student outcomes. Available: <http://www.aacu.org/publications/pdfs/StudentsBestReport.pdf>

### III. PROFILES: COLLEGE B

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- Describe the rationale behind studying
- Develop plans for pursuing learning goals
- Articulate the value of considering multiple perspectives
- Make connections between disparate ideas

For each of the 14 items, College B created a rubric that rates students as “not meeting expectations,” “meets basic, incoming expectations,” “proficient,” and “advanced.” This allows institutions to focus not just on growth in individual classes, but to assess the extent to which the liberal arts education they provide has a larger impact on students’ personal growth.

2. **Common Essay:** Administered to a sample of students at each institution, the purpose of the essay is to assess the extent to which students are able to apply the analytical skills acquired in their liberal arts courses to general questions and themes. This year, the essay prompt is as follows:

“As a student, you have been selected to be on committee of alumni and professors to investigate if your university should adopt “no grade” policy. Please consider the pros and cons of such a change and give the three best arguments that support and negate your view.”

Applying a second rubric (different from that discussed above), faculty from each university collaborate to assess the extent to which students’ are able to answer the question in a concise, comprehensive manner (e.g., they consider both sides of the argument and address each accordingly).

3. **Focus Groups:** Each institution conducts focus groups with students to assess the extent to which students feel their writing skills have improved since matriculation and the reasons for the growth. College B found that students are most engaged in focus groups that are run by students (they ask students from the writing center to administer focus group sessions) because they are able to more quickly engage with their peers than with a faculty member.

#### Findings

Based on the three forms of assessment (survey, essay, focus groups) two main findings were gleaned:

- Through student focus groups, College B found that the professors who students identify as the most helpful in helping students improve their writing skills are the professors who give structured feedback and who then hold students accountable to clearly defined standards.
- As a result of the writing sample, all universities found that students have difficulty viewing problems or considering points of view that are different from their own. Additionally, students have difficulty addressing problems from more than one angle.

#### Addressing Pedagogy

Based on findings from the assessment, College B implemented optional faculty workshops that focus on the most effective ways to comment on student writing. Largely, the information presented in these workshops was developed by:

### **III. PROFILES: COLLEGE B**

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1. Learning from the most effective professors (e.g., how to set and hold students accountable to defined writing standards)
2. Learning from student papers that have gone through a series of revisions. Specifically, faculty compared the improvements of specific papers over the course of several rounds of editing with the comments that the professor provided. This allowed faculty to identify the types of comments that were most useful in improving writing. (To facilitate this review, faculty anonymously submitted papers. Contacts report that professors were eager to participate in this exercise.)

Regardless of the methods used to improve pedagogy, contacts at College B find that, in the interest of timeliness and effectiveness, it is best to “engage colleagues and move quickly toward improvements in teaching and learning rather than construct elaborate research methodologies.” This is similar to the views held by contacts at College C (see page 6).

#### **Grant Administration**

The dean of faculty originally organized the grant application, and faculty members support all subsequent grant activities. While internal collaboration must be strong to provide the necessary support to achieve intended results, contacts note that the collaboration among institutions that are also involved in the grant is an invaluable tool. Specifically, institutions use one another to identify problems, discuss solutions, and learn from each other’s successes (and failures).

### III. PROFILES: UNIVERSITY A

#### Summary

**Title:** Effective Approaches to Refining Skills in Oral Communication

**Total Funds Granted:** \$25,000 over 12 months

**Summary:** Building on shared traditions of rigorous assessment, and using common assessment tools that will allow direct comparison of student experiences and outcomes, University A and another university will form a ten-member working group to assess students' oral communication skills and their programs'—Seminar Approach to General Education and Scholarship (SAGES) and the other university's first year seminars and course on oral communication—success in enhancing student learning and engagement. Two external experts in the field of oral communication instruction will serve as project advisers. The group will inventory what has been done so far on their campuses to assess oral communication. They will compare more general student learning outcomes through a study of data already gathered from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). With that preparatory work done, the collaborative will then seek to develop a long-range, comprehensive assessment plan for oral communication on their campuses.

*Source: Teagle Foundation*

#### Overview

The grant is aimed at assessing the extent to which students successfully acquire oral communication skills. Currently, University A does not offer classes that specifically focuses on these skills, but instead places an emphasis on the acquisition of strong oral communication abilities within a group of general education classes. Specifically, SAGES (the Seminar Approach to General Education and Scholarship) is a series of general education interdisciplinary seminars that, as contacts note, guide students towards "developing the ability to make persuasive arguments in written and oral form." Students participate in three SAGES seminars by the end of their sophomore year, one in their junior year, and then a capstone course in their senior year.

#### Measures

Using longitudinal data, University A will assess changes in oral communication skills that result from the implementation of SAGES. In addition, the assessment will look at improvements that can be made to the program that will more effectively develop students' oral skills. There are several assessments that will be used to measure the changes in students' skills, specifically:

Measure	Administered
"National Survey of Student Engagement"	Indiana University, Bloomington
Course evaluations (general)	Internal
Course evaluations (specific to SAGES)	Internal
Senior exit survey	Internal

### **III. PROFILES: UNIVERSITY A**

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#### **Findings**

Through assessing the longitudinal data on oral communication skills (student reported measures), the working group found that there has been substantial growth on aggregate scores of students' oral communication abilities. Primarily, faculty attribute these results to the implementation of SAGES. However, despite positive growth, the assessment uncovered a disconnect between the strength of the oral communication skills students acquired in the first SAGES seminar and the two subsequent seminars.

#### **Oral Communication Primer**

To help students preserve oral communication skills between the first and subsequent seminars, a SAGES Fellow (a member of the community, such as a lawyer or journalist, who is invited to teach a seminar), in consultation with faculty, developed a primer that will help students to effectively plan oral presentations in SAGES seminars and throughout their undergraduate career. Approximately 40 pages in length, this document will provide information on:

- Approaching oral speeches/talks
- Preparing accompanying materials
- Designing PowerPoint presentations
- Writing speeches versus writing notes for a speech
- Memorizing presentations versus using notes as a guide
- Keeping the audience in mind

#### **Addressing Pedagogy**

This oral communications primer was not only developed with the aim of helping students prepare high quality presentations, but also with the intention that faculty would focus on the practices and themes outlined and therefore improve their teaching. In addition to having a hard-copy of the primer to serve as a reference, the university is considering developing optional faculty workshops around the tool. Specifically, one plan is to work with the University Center for Innovation and Teaching Excellence (UCITE) to offer a faculty workshop to introduce the primer, explain the philosophy behind its development, and discuss future directions for the tool as well as teaching oral communication skills.

#### **Challenges to Assessment**

There are several factors that must be taken into consideration when evaluating an assessment tool. Not only must the type of information produced from the measure be satisfactory, but tangential factors such as the cost, the labor involved, and the likelihood that students and faculty will participate are also important. As a result of struggling to find an adequate measure, University A relies heavily on anecdotal testament given by faculty members. Contacts comment, "if faculty think there is merit in a program that teaches oral communication skills than there's merit." Faculty are also asked to assess if they feel that students are "better oral communicators" than they were 10, 20, 30 years ago.

## IV. COLLEGE D

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### Overview

The Center of Inquiry at College D works with institutions across the country to compile longitudinal data at the level of the individual student to assess learning outcomes. Called the National Study of Liberal Arts Education, the aim of the research is to assess how learning outcomes change over the course of students' undergraduate experience and then to hone in on the reasons behind such changes. With this information, institutions can provide targeted pedagogical support to faculty that focus on improving areas of student weakness.

Specifically, the assessment focuses on seven outcomes associated with the undergraduate liberal arts education:

1. Effective reasoning and problem solving
2. Inclination to inquire and lifelong learning
3. Integration of learning
4. Intercultural effectiveness
5. Leadership
6. Moral reasoning
7. Well-being

### Measures

To compile the longitudinal data, individual student outcomes are assessed at least three times over the course of a four-year undergraduate period (upon matriculation, at the end of freshman year, during senior year).

Assessments conducted by the team at College D supplement other measures that institutions have already put in place to assess learning outcomes. Measures used by the college's assessment team are essentially the same across all institutions but have the ability to be customized to specific institutions to take into account student-specific data such as grades, awards, and involvement in special programs.

### Using Data to Guide Pedagogical Support

After the team at College D collects student data, they work with the institution to help faculty and administrators identify how to use the information to guide the development of pedagogical support initiatives. As contacts note, "the question is how to get the information into useful pieces that can be taken back to the faculty and used to support their improved pedagogy."

In addition to providing targeted faculty support, some institutions are going to begin giving students feedback on their survey scores in order to make students aware of some of their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, several institutions are considering implementing follow-up studies that will test a different group of students using the same measures used by the team at College D.

### Funding

The team at College D is funded primarily by the Lilly Endowment but receives funding from the Teagle Foundation and the Davis Education Foundation as well. In addition, institutions entering the study in fall 2009 all committed \$10,000 that will be used to develop pedagogical support programs at the end of the data collection and assessment period. College D feels that it is important for institutions to commit funds to the project so that they are prepared to respond to the data therefore ensuring that the assessment will result in an actionable response.

## IV. COLLEGE D

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### **Lessons Learned**

Contacts note the importance of using longitudinal data at the student level. Assessing data at the institutional level does not provide information on how the results are achieved and thus it is impossible to understand how to improve upon areas of weakness.

Additionally, because institutions only have a limited number of resources, it is necessary for faculty and administrators to strategically allocate funds when planning pedagogical support programs. Targeted planning is possible with individual student data because it allows faculty and administrators to look for variation within the institution and identify the practices that make a difference.

### **Professional Services Note**

The Advisory Board has worked to ensure the accuracy of the information it provides to its members. This project relies on data obtained from many sources, however, and The Advisory Board cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information or its analysis in all cases. Further, The Advisory Board is not engaged in rendering clinical, legal, accounting, or other professional services. Its projects should not be construed as professional advice on any particular set of facts or circumstances. Members are advised to consult with their staff and senior management, or other appropriate professionals, prior to implementing any changes based on this project. Neither The Advisory Board Company nor its programs are responsible for any claims or losses that may arise from any errors or omissions in their projects, whether caused by The Advisory Board Company or its sources. 1-PDN4N

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