

## Creating a Culture of Inquiry: Recasting Institutional “Problems” as SoTL Opportunities (That include Students in the Inquiry Process)

Lilly-Greensboro Conference on College Teaching  
Koury Convention Center, Greensboro, NC | February 6, 2010

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### Session Overview

What happens when institutional assessment efforts are reframed as a communal inquiry process grounded in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)? For example, instead of focusing directly on improving retention and graduation rates – common institutional goals – what if institutional assessment was instead undertaken as a discovery process that involved faculty members, students, and administrators in answering the SoTL-like question: What are the factors that promote or impede our students' success? Our experience indicates that adopting a SoTL-based inquiry approach to meeting institutional objectives (institutional SoTL) that involves faculty members, administrators, and students leads to greater engagement, improved guidance on meeting institutional goals, and an increased understanding of the institution's learning environment – compared to traditional institutional assessment processes. Institutional SoTL projects lay the foundation for intentional institutional change aimed at improving student success and creating a “culture of inquiry.”

**Starting Point: The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education.** Our work on “institutional SoTL” is a direct outgrowth of our participation in the *Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education*, a national longitudinal study investigating the “teaching practices, programs, and institutional structures” that affect student growth in college. More broadly, the *Wabash National Study* explores “the extent to which students develop because of their college experiences, the conditions that contribute to this development, and ways that institutions can more readily assess and act on this knowledge to enhance their impact.” The *Wabash National Study* employs a comprehensive collection of assessment tools, including surveys and measures of academic proficiency, to measure student growth over four years. The results of the *Wabash National Study*, because of their breadth, allow institutions to develop an “institutional narrative” describing the strengths and weakness of their students and their learning environment, while also suggesting ways in which that learning environment might be improved.

Campus-based results from the *Wabash National Study* serve as a **starting point** for institutional inquiry that involves students and faculty members in a continuing SoTL process: (1) asking (new) questions, (2) gathering data, (3) analyzing the results, (4) sharing the results and obtaining critical feedback, and (5) implementing new initiatives.

**Using Data to Inform Action.** First-year *Wabash National Study* results for NC A&T (our four-year longitudinal study began in fall, 2007 with 722 freshman students) are being used to develop and implement initiatives aimed at promoting increased academic performance and retention, including:

**(1) Wabash-Provost Scholars Program.** Wabash-Provost Scholars are a group of undergraduate NC A&T students trained to conduct focus group sessions that provide a more in-depth view of specific *Wabash National Study* results. The Wabash-Provost Scholars initiative led to a comprehensive student-developed report of focus group results and recommendations in spring, 2009. Two new cohorts of Wabash-Provost Scholars were trained in 2009-2010 and are conducting focus groups on the impact of Supplemental Instruction in freshman-level courses and student time-use. They will analyze the results of their work, develop a written report, and lead a presentation of their work with top university officials in April, 2010. The Wabash-Provost Scholars program is intended to institutionalize the integration of students in the institutional assessment process. Wabash-Provost Scholars have presented their work at a variety of educational conferences and are available to lead campus workshops training students to conduct focus group interviews.

**(2) Early Alert-Supplemental Instruction (SI) Initiative.** Analysis of NC A&T *Wabash National Study* data led to the development of a targeted Early Alert/Supplemental Instruction initiative in fall, 2009 aimed at increasing first-year retention rates. This initiative combines early and frequent feedback to freshmen students who are underperforming in their courses with required supplemental instruction led by tenure-track and lecturer-level instructors. Three freshman-level general education courses served as pilot courses in fall, 2009. Two instructors are involved in an ATL Scholars Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) project in spring, 2010 aimed at determining the efficacy of instructor-led and student-led SI sessions.

**(3) Academy for Teaching and Learning Workshops.** The Academy for Teaching and Learning is leading a series of workshops during the 2009-2010 academic year aimed at improving clarity of course learning outcomes, promoting prompt feedback, and enhancing pedagogical practices, growth areas highlighted in our *Wabash National Study* results.

**Summary.** *Wabash National Study* results have been shared with faculty, staff, and students in an open and transparent manner. Campus dialogue arising from the results has led to new inquiry questions to investigate. The Wabash-Provost Scholars continue to serve as institutional SoTL investigators, collecting and analyzing data and writing up/presenting their results for further sharing and discussion. A number of Scholars have presented with us at conferences on their experiences as Scholars. The institutional inquiry process that we have initiated continues to yield valuable insights into the conditions, practices, and institutional structures that affect student growth at A&T. Most important, the data generated from our inquiry process help us identify and address gaps in student learning and serve as the basis for further inquiry into the causes of those gaps – continuing the institutional SoTL process and creating a “culture of inquiry.”