Reframing Institutional Assessment: Involving Faculty and Students in SoTL Efforts Focused on Institutional Objectives

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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 faculty 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. A new cohort of Wabash-Provost Scholars was trained in late September, 2009 and will begin conducting focus groups in spring, 2010.

(2) **Early Alert–Supplemental Instruction 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 are serving as pilot courses in fall, 2009.

(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 their results for further sharing and discussion. A number of Scholars have presented with us at regional 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.

For more information on the *Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education*  
[http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-overview/](http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-overview/)