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EVALUATOR REPORT
In Search of Curricular Coherence (2018)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE FACULTY PLANNING AND CURRICULAR COHERENCE INITIATIVE
In fall 2013 The Teagle Foundation issued an RFP (/Grants-Initiatives/Past-Initiatives/Past-Initiatives-Items/Faculty-Planning-and-Curricular-Coherence/Faculty-Planning-and-Curricular-Coherence) inviting selected institutions and organizations to apply for grants that addressed the following question: "How can faculty work together to create a more coherent and intentional curriculum whose goals, pathways, and outcomes are clear to students and other constituencies with a stake in the future of higher education?" The grant initiative sought to "support campus initiatives that delve deep into the structure of the curriculum and make transparent to students what they can expect to learn and how the curriculum's architecture delivers this learning."

A total of 15 implementation grants were funded under the Faculty Planning and Curricular Coherence initiative between May 2014 and May 2018. This essay is based on an evaluation of four of the early grants in this initiative, involving 12 institutions: Oberlin College, College of Wooster, Ohio Wesleyan University, Kenyon College, Denison University and Allegheny College; Virginia Wesleyan University, Davis & Elkins College, Shenandoah University, and Eckerd College; San Francisco State University; and Pomona College, Claremont McKenna College, Harvey Mudd College, Pitzer College, and Scripps College (also known as The Claremont Colleges). The author reviewed proposals, annual project reports and related documentation; conducted annual phone calls with representatives of each participating campus; attended the April 2017 convening (/Grants-Initiatives/Listing#curricularcoherence) of the institutions participating in this initiative; and visited selected campuses.

A PROBLEM OF LONG STANDING
The issue of the fragmented and incoherent curriculum is not a new one. It first received national attention in 1983, with the report of the National Commission on Educational Excellence, *A Nation at Risk*. Two years later, the Association of American Colleges (now the Association of American Colleges and Universities [AAC&U]) followed with *Integrity in the College Curriculum*, which focused on the decline of the undergraduate degree, and pointed specifically to the incoherence of the curriculum.

The discussion continues today. Former Harvard president Derek Bok devoted a

chapter in *Higher Education in America* to the curriculum, underscoring the haphazard structure of many majors and the architecture of the degree. The solution, he posited, lies in an evidence-based approach to curriculum reform led by faculty. Scholar Robert Zemsky has been a persistent critic of the unfettered growth of the curriculum, both in terms of the educational confusion it creates for students and as a driver of costs. Recent works such as *Checklist for Change* and *Making Sense of the College Curriculum* elaborate on the nature of the problem and call for a collective faculty ownership and leadership in devising solutions.

INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES

Institutions have different implicit interpretations of curricular coherence and varied approaches to achieving it. Some see the faculty role as paramount; others view the students' efforts to integrate their learning as key, with faculty playing a supporting role. The strategies that institutions undertook in their projects reflected their views on the locus of responsibility for achieving curricular coherence. The principal strategies were as follows:

1 Curriculum redesign (general education and the major)

2 Curriculum mapping

3 Identifying clusters of related courses around an issue or topic

4 Using pedagogy, especially high-impact practices (HIPs), to drive greater coherence in the curriculum

5 Using advising to help students see connections within the curriculum and among various learning opportunities

LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned from the four projects are as follows:

Recognizing the problem and agreeing on its contours are important up-front work.

Shared recognition of the existence of a problem and agreement on its nature constituted a crucial first step in the reform process, generally accomplished through faculty retreats, workshops, and abundant conversations.

Academic reform is a learning process for faculty.

All the institutions supported their change efforts with faculty development opportunities. Focusing on improvement led to a climate of inquiry and learning, which the institutions supported by providing opportunities for a scholarly approach to the issues in conversation with colleagues within the department, the institution, and across partner institutions.

Lead with a carrot and start with the willing.

Most institutions chose to start their reform initiative by inviting willing faculty members to participate, expanding the group of participants as the effort progressed and successes became visible. Some institutions developed mini-grant programs to departments or groups of faculty to incentivize their participation.

Identify and address structural barriers.

Some good ideas fail because of processes, policies, and decision-making structures that get in the way. Identifying these barriers and taking steps to address them were key to several institutions' ability to move forward with their initiatives.

Consider sustainability early on.

Not every innovation turns out to be sustainable. Although not all obstacles can be anticipated, several participating institutions thought carefully upfront about what would happen after foundation funding expired and started planning early for the future.

Collaboration is difficult work.

The participating institutions used various strategies to address the obstacles to collaboration, including creating a shared vision for the work, harnessing the energy of faculty champions, identifying skillful project leadership, bringing in external voices, and supporting institutional leaders.

Many paths can lead to the same outcome.

Institutions prize their differences, as do schools and departments within institutions. Project institutions took care to identify shared goals and desired outcomes but at the same time gave units and departments the freedom to create their own paths to achieving them.

Context matters.

Change initiatives do not happen in a vacuum. Project institutions experienced leadership turnover, unexpected structural barriers, and budget and enrollment shortfalls, learning that few reform efforts proceed in a linear fashion.

It is likely that reform efforts will be additive in terms of human and financial resources, unless there are specific ground rules.

It is much less contentious to add people (or add to existing workloads) and money to support new curricular work. It is unclear whether the ledger will be balanced with subtractions. Some institutions were explicit about ground rules pertaining to growth or increasing costs, but overall, there was little evidence that many institutional efforts would be either cost-neutral or cost-reducing in the long run.

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The Teagle Foundation
570 Lexington Avenue, 38th Floor
New York, NY 10022 US
212-373-1972

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