



THE COUNCIL OF
INDEPENDENT COLLEGES



Engaging Evidence

How Independent
Colleges and Universities
Use Data to Improve
Student Learning

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The Council of Independent Colleges is an association of more than 645 nonprofit independent colleges and universities and 90 higher education organizations that has worked since 1956 to support college and university leadership, advance institutional excellence, and enhance public understanding of private higher education's contributions to society. CIC is the major national organization that focuses on providing services to leaders of independent colleges and universities as well as conferences, seminars, and other programs that help institutions improve educational quality, administrative and financial performance, and institutional visibility. CIC also provides support to state fundraising associations that organize programs and generate contributions for private colleges and universities. The Council is headquartered at One Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. For more information, visit www.cic.edu.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
About the Consortium	4
Consortium Activities	6
Lessons Learned	9
Next Steps	21
References	22
List of Participating Institutions	23



Founded in 1911, **Anderson University** (South Carolina) is a comprehensive university affiliated with the South Carolina Baptist Convention. Anderson has expanded more than 80 percent over the past eight years and now serves approximately 3,000 students.
www.andersonuniversity.edu



Founded by the Sisters of Saint Anne in 1946, **Anna Maria College** (Massachusetts) is a four-year private, coeducational, Catholic liberal arts college located on a 192-acre campus, just minutes from the college-town of Worcester.
www.annamaria.edu

Introduction

Postsecondary institutions are under increasing scrutiny to provide evidence of student learning. Policy makers and accreditors continue to call for greater transparency and accountability in higher education, and as recently as summer 2013, President Obama called for reform of the nation's student financial aid system in a way that links federal support to college and university performance.

The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) has long been a national leader in voluntary efforts to improve the quality of student learning and a strong advocate for institutional autonomy in accountability efforts. CIC has sponsored multiple initiatives to help its member colleges respond to the calls for transparency and accountability, and CIC has supported academic leaders who seek to be transparent and to document the quality of academic experiences and the resulting improvements in student learning. A study by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) found that more than 90 percent of colleges and universities conduct at least one valid assessment of student learning to gauge institutional performance, and two-thirds use three or more approaches or instruments (Kuh and Ikenberry 2009).

Despite efforts to increase the number and frequency of assessments of student learning, many colleges and universities need help to make good use of assessment results for the improvement of teaching and learning. To address this need, in February 2012, CIC announced the selection of 40 independent colleges and universities to participate in a new project it named the Engaging Evidence Consortium. The primary goal of this initiative, generously funded by the Teagle Foundation, was to develop a network of colleges and universities that has learned how to use the results of student outcomes assessment to improve student learning. Selected institutions participated in a series of consortial activities designed to support leadership teams from each institution to undertake projects that used data to improve student learning. This report tells the story of the Engaging Evidence Consortium by documenting the work of the participating institutions.



*Founded in 1869, **Augsburg College** (Minnesota) is a private coeducational liberal arts college affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran College in America. Committed to intentional diversity, Augsburg's urban location in the Twin Cities provides its 3,700 students with access to community service and internship opportunities.*
www.augsburg.edu



***Cedarville University** is a Christ-centered learning community located in southwestern Ohio. Founded in 1887, Cedarville attracts 3,400 undergraduate, graduate, and online students to more than 100 areas of study.*
www.cedarville.edu

Institutions that participated in the Engaging Evidence Consortium learned a variety of lessons, including:

- **The Right Assessment Matters.** A primary goal of the Engaging Evidence project was to encourage use of existing assessment data. As a result of exploring sources of evidence already being used, a number of campus teams discovered weaknesses inherent in their assessment instruments.
- **Engage the Faculty.** Nearly all Consortium institutions reported that engaging faculty with evidence of student learning is an important part of the assessment process.
- **Make It a Team Effort.** Participants in the Engaging Evidence Consortium emphasized the importance of a collaborative approach that included administrators and faculty leaders in the assessment of student learning.
- **Planning Matters.** Many of the institutional members of the Engaging Evidence Consortium observed that sound planning played an important role in the execution of assessment projects.
- **Keep It Focused.** Maintaining the focus of an assessment project by completing targeted goals is an important strategy for project success and sustainability.
- **Collaboration among Institutions Is a Powerful Strategy.** Engaging Evidence Consortium members testified to the added value of inter-institutional collaboration in making their projects successful.



*Established in 1854, **Central Methodist University** (Missouri) has its main campus in Fayette and collaborative partnerships across the state. Central Methodist University enrolls more than 5,000 students in its graduate, baccalaureate, and associate degree programs.*
www.centralmethodist.edu



***Champlain College** (Vermont) has provided career-focused education to students from its hilltop campus in Burlington since 1878. The college offers traditional undergraduate and online undergraduate courses, along with online certificate and degree programs, eight master's degree programs, and study-abroad programs in Canada and Ireland.*
www.champlain.edu

About the Consortium

The CIC Engaging Evidence Consortium resulted in a network of colleges and universities that have enhanced their ability to use the results of student outcomes assessment for the improvement of student learning. In October 2011, CIC sent a call for proposals to its 612 member institutions. A total of 72 applications were received for the 40 institutional spaces allocated to the Consortium. Institutions selected were those that:

- Demonstrated a proven record of using evidence of student learning to improve teaching and learning;
- Proposed a campus project that fit the institutional culture and used existing data that could make a significant difference in student learning;
- Provided a plan for the campus project that was feasible and that involved members of the institutional team in substantial ways; and
- Identified measures for the campus project that would provide evidence of the success of the project.

Selected institutions reflected the diversity of CIC's membership, including institutions with smaller enrollments, such as Wilson College, Sweet Briar College, and Marlboro College, and those with larger enrollments, such as Saint Leo University, Lesley University, and Springfield College. Among the participating institutions were two women's colleges, two historically black colleges, an Appalachian college, and a Hispanic-serving university. The institutions were from every region in the continental United States. For the complete list of Consortium members, see page 23.

All of the projects completed by the participating colleges and universities were designed to support the institution's instructional mission and to improve student learning. Although each campus project was unique, participating institutions were clustered according to certain themes that emerged among the types of projects.

- **Core Curriculum or General Education Curriculum.** Many projects were focused on strengthening selected aspects of the core curriculum or general education curriculum of the institution. Among these projects were those that worked to improve written communication, critical thinking, and/or information literacy.



Christian Brothers University

(Tennessee) is a private institution that was founded in 1871 by members of the Institute of the Brothers of Christian Schools, a Roman Catholic religious teaching congregation. Christian Brothers University combines tradition, innovation, and education through the spirit of Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle for its nearly 1,600 enrolled students.
www.cbu.edu



*Founded in 1869, **Clafin University** is the oldest historically black college or university in South Carolina. The independent four-year coeducational residential liberal arts university is affiliated with the United Methodist Church and offers 36 undergraduate majors, 24 minors, and two graduate degrees.*
www.clafin.edu

- **Interdisciplinary Learning.** Another set of projects integrated some aspect of student learning across academic departments or determined the impact of interdisciplinary studies on student learning.
- **First- or Second-Year Experience.** A third group of institutions' plans were to integrate student learning objectives across the first or second year of a student's experience.
- **Academic Support and Academic Advising.** Still other projects explored the effect of enhancements to academic support and academic advising activities on student learning outcomes.

Consortium members also used various assessment approaches and instruments. Not surprisingly, many used evidence from standard assessment tools such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). In addition, institutions used evidence obtained from rubrics designed to assess student work. Some institutions used the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) VALUE rubrics, while others developed their own rubrics intended to evaluate the learning associated with capstone experiences or other student projects. Another set of institutional projects explored the assessment of student performance through the evaluation of web-based student portfolios.



Founded in 1908, **Coker College** (South Carolina) is a student-centered comprehensive college known for its “Round Table” teaching style that encourages discussion and sharing of ideas. Coker serves nearly 1,200 undergraduate students from 28 states and 14 countries.
www.coker.edu



Founded in 1864, **Concordia University Chicago** (Illinois) is a comprehensive university of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and based in the liberal arts. Located ten miles west of downtown Chicago, the university serves more than 5,200 students.
www.cuchicago.edu

Consortium Activities

The Engaging Evidence Consortium was modeled after the many team-based, capacity-building workshops and other consortia that CIC has administered successfully. The major activities of this project consisted of a workshop for teams from all 40 institutions, an online community interaction, webinars, and administration of project implementation grants.

Engaging Evidence Online Community

The CIC Engaging Evidence Online Community website served as a resource to participants throughout the project and will be continued to help institutions sustain their projects. The online community was designed to be a document repository and a vehicle to facilitate ongoing interaction among participants. The website contains a variety of information and resources, including a copy of each institution's proposal, interim report, and final project report. Another section contains assessment resources including articles, publications, conference presentations, and reports as well as links to web-based material related to assessment and curricular development.

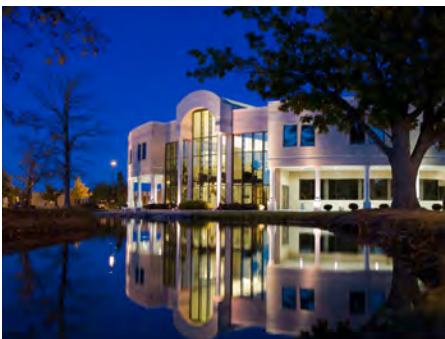
Webinars

A total of five webinars were offered to participating team members during the project.

- **Webinar I.** The initial webinar, held in April 2012, served as an introduction to the Consortium. CIC explained the Engaging Evidence Online community of practice to participants, provided a demonstration of the site, and presented initial plans for the August 2012 Consortium workshop.
- **Webinar II.** The second webinar, held in June 2012, helped participants prepare for the August 2012 workshop. CIC staff helped team members develop poster presentations and reviewed guidelines for campus project action plans.
- **Webinar III.** The third webinar, held in November 2012, followed the summer consortium meeting. The webinar featured a panel presentation by representatives of two participating institutions—Anderson University (SC) and Nebraska Wesleyan University. The panelists were selected to represent the diversity of campus projects and highlight institutions that were making significant progress on their projects. The panelists discussed their progress and lessons learned from the initial implementation of their projects.



Founded in 1962, **Franklin Pierce University** (New Hampshire) enrolls 1,400 undergraduates at its main campus in Rindge and serves 1,000 graduate students across its four graduate and professional studies centers.
www.franklinperce.edu



Hilbert College (New York) is a private four-year college founded in 1957 in the Franciscan tradition. With nearly 1,100 students, Hilbert offers career-focused majors and more than 50 minors and concentrations.
www.hilbert.edu

- **Webinar IV.** Final report formats and advice regarding successful completion of assessment projects were topics for the fourth webinar, which took place in April 2013 as the campus teams prepared to enter the important final stages of their campus projects. This webinar featured Charlie Blaich, director of inquiries at the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, and Kathleen Wise, associate director of inquiries, who provided Consortium members with “Advice from the Trenches: Guidance for the Successful Completion of Your Project.”
- **Webinar V.** The fifth and final webinar, held in November 2013, was used to review the final report and lessons learned from the Consortium. The purpose of this session was to share the final report with Consortium members and to encourage Consortium members to continue and sustain the important work that they had begun on their respective campuses.

All webinars were recorded and made available through the online community site for any team members who were unable to participate in the live event and for those who later wished to review the information presented. Consortium members reported that the webinars supported their project progress and allowed the participants to continue to connect with one another throughout the project.

Workshop

A major activity of the Engaging Evidence Consortium was the workshop that was held August 5–7, 2012, in Washington, DC. The workshop agenda provided participants with ample opportunities to engage with leading national experts on student learning and outcomes assessment, to learn from other project participants, and to work with their institutional teams to revise project action plans in light of what they learned at the meeting.

Two nationally-known experts on assessment, Peggy Maki, former director of assessment at the American Association for Higher Education and a consultant who specializes in helping institutions integrate assessment of student learning into educational practices, processes, and structures, and Charlie Blaich, were the featured speakers. Their presentations provided complementary approaches to assessment and its use in improving student learning. Along with senior advisor Mary Ann Coughlin, Maki and Blaich led break-out sessions, served as reviewers for the poster session, and provided advice during team meetings. During the closing plenary session, each offered reflections on the meeting and made suggestions for implementing institutional projects.



Founded in 1898, **Husson University** (Maine) is a private university located approximately 250 miles north of Boston and 250 miles east of Quebec City. The university serves 3,100 undergraduate and graduate students at its Bangor campus and satellite education centers.
www.husson.edu



Founded in 1851, **Lasell College** (Massachusetts) is an independent coeducational institution situated on a 53-acre campus eight miles from downtown Boston. The college sits adjacent to the Lasell Village, a college-sponsored retirement community with a learning mandate that has drawn international attention.
www.lasell.edu

One significant feature of the workshop was the poster session, during which each institutional team illustrated its campus project plans and questions through a poster. Participants were assigned to review and provide written feedback about a set of posters. These reviews were shared with institutional teams, who then discussed the comments, recommendations, and critiques made by colleagues and revised their action plans accordingly.

Workshop leaders presented sessions that addressed how to overcome common barriers that prevent institutions from using evidence to improve student learning. The leaders also facilitated small group discussions that addressed many topics: What faculty support is necessary for effective assessment, and how can institutions encourage that support? How can faculty and staff members best manage, summarize, and present results from national surveys to inform action? The workshop agenda included time for team members to meet together as well as time for participants to meet and talk with participants from other institutions.

Institutional Grants

Thanks to generous funding from the Teagle Foundation, CIC was able to provide each participating institution a small implementation grant. These grants enabled various campus activities. Many institutional grants were used to support faculty development activities (such as retreats or honoraria for assessment experts to speak on campus), while others covered a variety of costs associated with their campus projects (for example, fees for standardized assessment instruments or supplies associated with data collection or analysis). Although the grants were small, the activities they helped to fund were catalysts for significant change and contributed to the successful completion of campus action plans.



Lesley University (Massachusetts) educates more than 7,500 women and men a year and is one of the nation's largest providers of graduate professional education to K–12 educators. Anchored by a strong liberal arts curriculum, Lesley offers undergraduate and graduate programs in education, the arts, human services, and the environment at its Cambridge and Boston campuses, online, and in a number of states.
www.lesley.edu



Lynn University (Florida) is an independent, coeducational, residential university whose curriculum is built on individualized attention and an international focus. Founded in 1962, Lynn enrolls more than 2,000 students representing 45 states and territories and 90 nations in five academic colleges and three specialty programs.
www.lynn.edu

Lessons Learned

A variety of results emerged from the institutional projects undertaken in the Engaging Evidence Consortium. What was learned should provide valuable insight and information to academic leaders of other colleges and universities seeking to use evidence to improve student learning.

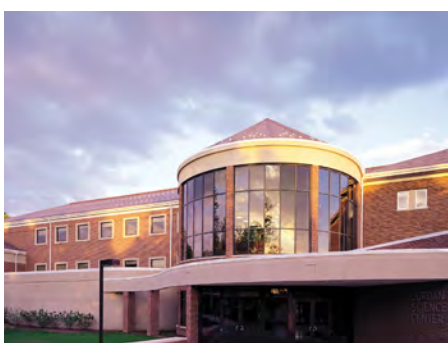
The Right Assessment Matters

Researchers and statisticians have long known that the results of any analysis are only as good as the quality of the underlying data. The quality of the data is directly related to the measurement that was used and the ability of that measure to assess the factors of interest to the researcher. A key goal of the Engaging Evidence project was to encourage campuses to use and build upon existing assessment data. A number of campus teams found weaknesses inherent in their assessment instruments. Some discovered that the instrument being used was not aligned with the student learning outcomes they were seeking to measure, while others found the data to be insufficient to answer key questions about learning outcomes.

Two specific examples of the limitations of data and measures were found in the work of **Coker College** and **Husson University**. As part of its Engaging Evidence project, Coker College had experienced success in measuring student learning in most program areas; however, the institution had only modest amounts of data regarding the information literacy of its student population. The goal of Coker College's project was to review current data and determine what additional data needed to be captured regarding the information literacy of their students; it then aimed to use the evidence to structure a plan to assess students' information literacy. Upon reviewing the initial data, which was derived from an institutional instrument administered through first-year courses, team members were struck by how much students knew about information literacy. As the Coker College team members sought to learn more about the baseline knowledge of their students with regard to information literacy, however, they learned that they lacked the evidence necessary to improve their educational plan. With the support from the CIC campus grant, the Coker team piloted the Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS), a standardized instrument designed to assess information literacy that is based on the Association of College and Research



Established in 1946, **Marlboro College** (Vermont) is a private, residential, coeducational liberal arts college enrolling about 300 students annually. The college offers an egalitarian culture and student-centered approach to education exemplified by individualized courses of study customized by students in consultation with faculty advisors.
www.marlboro.edu



Founded in 1909 by the Brethren in Christ Church, **Messiah College** (Pennsylvania) is a private Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. The college offers more than 80 undergraduate majors and a comprehensive selection of online graduate programs to more than 3,000 students.
www.messiah.edu

Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (www.projectsails.org). When they compared the results of the two assessment instruments, team members concluded that the original instrument was not designed to address the same skill sets as SAILS. Using the SAILS test not only provided institutional leaders with more accurate baseline information about students' information literacy skills, but it also allowed them to compare the results with those of their peer institutions. Faculty members now are using these results to redesign learning activities that foster the fundamental information literacy skills students need for success in the classroom.

Husson University's project focused on student's ethical and social growth. It was designed to define, measure, assess, and improve the teaching of ethics across the curriculum with the ultimate goal of increasing students' capacity for personal and professional ethical reflection. Initial analysis of existing data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program and NSSE surveys raised questions and concerns about students' sense of ethical and social responsibility. The Husson team decided to use focus groups to gain a better understanding of the experiences of both faculty members who taught ethics and the students in their classes. Used together, survey data and focus group findings led faculty members to select a unifying theme that will be incorporated into courses, student services, campus activities, and residential life. Husson University's intent is to bring more cohesion to teaching and learning about ethical issues. The project team members plan to continue to use both standardized instruments and focus groups while seeking additional assessment tools that will help them more fully understand students' academic experiences and understanding of ethical and moral issues. The team hopes to find or develop a new assessment tool to discern improvements in students' ability to engage in ethical reasoning and professional reflection.

Finding the appropriate alignment between the type of evidence being collected and the nature of the evidence needed to improve student learning also is critical. **Schreiner University** and **Westmont College** found that both quantitative and qualitative assessment measures were needed to provide a more complete picture of student learning. Schreiner University used curricular mapping to create programmatic and course-based outcomes for its longstanding Interdisciplinary Studies (IDST) program. The goal was to document the extent to which the original outcomes were being achieved in the IDST program. The project team reported:



Founded in 1894, **Morningside College** (Iowa) is a private four-year coeducational institution with a total enrollment of approximately 2,500 students. Morningside's undergraduates represent 25 states and ten countries, and the college offers five undergraduate degrees and one graduate degree.
www.morningside.edu



Founded in 1887, **Nebraska Wesleyan University** is a liberal arts institution with small class sizes and a broad-based curriculum of 106 majors, minors, and pre-professional programs, as well as four master's level programs. Nebraska Wesleyan enrolls approximately 1,500 undergraduates, 250 graduate students, and 250 adult learners.
www.nebrwesleyan.edu

In short, curriculum mapping provides very compelling data to illustrate the extent to which complex processes either do or do not work together. When combined with additional data sources—such as NSSE or the Educational Testing Service Proficiency Profile—curricular mapping offers clear decision points within programs and/or processes to change something and thereby cause the program and/or process to work differently and (one hopes) better.

Westmont College sought to deepen its understanding of student learning in relation to critical thinking and written communication learning outcomes. The Westmont team examined the results of its institution's participation in CIC's CLA Consortium. After completing this analysis, team members sought further information on these two important student learning outcomes by exploring the use of e-portfolios and rubrics to augment data from the CLA. According to the project team:

The project completion assisted the college in shaping the institutional assessment protocol so that we can measure student learning effectively and efficiently. It provided us with the excellent opportunity to deepen our understanding of student learning in relation to critical thinking and written communication learning outcomes; as well as to refine our procedures and instruments for facilitating student learning and measuring student progress.

Engage the Faculty

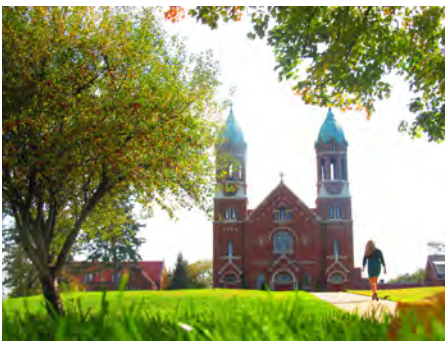
Most Consortium institutions agreed that engaging faculty members with evidence of student learning is an important part of the assessment process. **Springfield College** pointed to the value of faculty engagement in the process:

Through this year, faculty have commented that one of the most valuable parts of the project has been the opportunity to collaborate with faculty from across the campus. Faculty are so busy within their own departments that there is usually little opportunity to discuss in depth what kinds of assignments and skills we are teaching. Clearly there is more room for learning across the curriculum and interdisciplinary teaching to reinforce the skill sets that are essential to student success.

Faculty members are vital to the assessment team. When establishing assessment committees, faculty members offer practical and content expertise. **Trine University** and **Widener University** offered examples of the valuable roles that faculty members can play in assessment projects:



Our Lady of the Lake University (Texas) is a liberal arts and sciences institution with its main campus in San Antonio and additional sites in Houston and the Rio Grande Valley. Founded in 1895 by the Sisters of Divine Providence, the university offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programs in weekday, weekend, evening, and online formats.
www.ollusa.edu



Saint Joseph's College (Indiana) is a four-year Catholic college that offers 27 majors, four group majors, 35 minors, nine pre-professional programs, and three master's degrees. With an enrollment of nearly 1,200 students, Saint Joseph's College is located in Rensselaer, 90 minutes from both Chicago and Indianapolis.
www.saintjoe.edu

One of the biggest surprises that surfaced during this project was that some faculty members were already doing rubric work in their classes. Colleagues from different departments were working together to improve students' written and oral work. . . . It was encouraging to find little pockets of faculty who were already working toward having better writers and who, by their encouragement and enthusiasm, were able to become leaders in this initiative.
(Trine University)

We benefited from engaging faculty at multiple levels and around various topics. Given our positive outcomes, we would highlight the importance of framing the project so that it clearly aligns with institutional learning goals, finding common time for faculty to meet and discuss their activities, and developing strategies to invite and engage faculty within and across disciplines. The opportunities for faculty to share their instructional practices around diversity and cultural competence spurred new cross-disciplinary collaborations and validated the work of faculty who were previously involved in this work. (Widener University)

The team at **Augsburg College** also emphasized the importance of getting faculty buy-in to the success of assessment efforts, noting that “engaging faculty early in the process, particularly in assessing the data as they are collected, is key. The act of group assessment creates ownership of the results in a way that spurs review and action.”

Make It a Team Effort

A recent NILOA publication, *Using Assessment Results: Promising Practices of Institutions That Do It Well* (Baker, Jankowski, Provezis, and Kinzie 2013), reported campus practices that are most clearly aligned with nationally recognized assessment principles. Some of these practices included:

- Embedding assessment into institutional processes such as program review or governance structures; and
- Securing support from administrative leadership by making resources available for faculty and staff and supporting their professional development, providing a vision for assessment, and providing and encouraging space for discussion and collaboration (p. 5).

Participants in the CIC Engaging Evidence Consortium reported similar practices, although their reports and recommendations emphasize the importance of a collaborative team approach to assessment of student learning.



Saint Leo University is a Catholic liberal arts-based university founded in 1889. Located in central Florida, Saint Leo currently enrolls more than 16,000 students. The university has extended its footprint to teaching locations in seven states and its technological reach to learners nationally and internationally.
www.saintleo.edu



Founded in 1923, **Schreiner University** (Texas) is a private liberal arts college that offers undergraduate and graduate programs. Schreiner is affiliated by choice and covenant with the Presbyterian Church and is committed to educating students holistically.
www.schreiner.edu

For example, **Anderson University** (SC) undertook an ambitious project that identified general education skills and knowledge as demonstrated by students in senior capstone experiences in major courses of study. Once this initial phase of the project was completed, the Anderson team developed performance standards for general education skills that are integrated in senior capstone assignments. Next, the team gathered and analyzed data from these senior capstone assignments through an integrated assessment plan for the general education program. Anderson's ultimate goal was to use assessment data to inform curricular and pedagogical changes both in the general education program and within the majors. The Anderson team used its CIC campus grant to host a workshop for deans and department chairs to introduce AAC&U VALUE rubrics. When reflecting back on the success of the project and providing advice to future colleagues, the Anderson team summarized:

The level of success of this type of project is significantly determined by the commitment of department chairs that are willing to pilot a program/curricular change. To expand such an approach, an intentional program of education of academic leaders, deans, and department chairs is critical. At the same time, individual faculty members who want to improve their instruction in writing or other areas need an opportunity to receive information and seek feedback for their efforts.

The latter point reinforces the effectiveness of the team approach and the importance of the faculty's willingness to engage in the analysis of assessment data.

Nebraska Wesleyan University reported that the combination of faculty and administrative support made its project effective. "Perhaps the greatest lesson, one learned more by chance than intention, is that a comprehensive university-wide project develops most effectively when it evolves organically from the end users, yet simultaneously has an 'administrator' who captures and harnesses that evolution and systematically moves it forward." The Nebraska Wesleyan University project was to pilot the use of an e-portfolio system to improve the assessment of student learning outcomes. The team reported that the faculty members who piloted the use of the e-portfolio system became its powerful advocates. "The project has gained tremendous momentum due to their enthusiasm for the technology platform; their commitment to the enhanced potential for powerful integrative learning; their demonstrations of their work to colleagues; and their desire to help other faculty solve their pedagogical challenges through effective use of technology." It also was vital that the project have an administrative champion. Having "an 'administrator' (someone designated as 'in charge') is needed to facilitate and coordinate



Founded in 1865, **Shaw University** (North Carolina) was the first historically black university established in the South. Currently serving 2,100 students, Shaw is a private coeducational liberal arts university that awards degrees at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.
www.shawu.edu



Established in 1875, **Shenandoah University** (Virginia) is a private applied liberal arts institution with an enrollment of more than 4,000 students. Affiliated with the United Methodist Church, the university offers more than 80 programs of study in six schools.
www.su.edu

the project, providing structure and direction, to ensure that the momentum does not stall in the extended discussion and debate so inherent in faculty governance.”

Like Nebraska Wesleyan University, **Messiah College**, **Stetson University**, and **Wagner College** engaged in projects that made use of technology to support the assessment of student learning. Each noted that another important member of the assessment team was a representative from the information technology department. When asked what guidance they would share with colleagues undertaking a similar project, each offered valuable advice related to the use of technology.

We would engage technology experts earlier in the project than we had previously. There were technological solutions to some logistical issues related to data collection and analysis that would have gone more smoothly had this expertise been applied earlier and more adeptly in our plan. (Messiah College)

We also have learned not to underestimate the role of technology needs within assessment, particularly in the collection of non-writing-based artifacts to be assessed (such as speaking samples and photos of artistic samples). The technological aspects of the program offered the largest challenge for completion of the project. (Stetson University)

Ensure that the IT capacity for showing the [digital] stories is adequate. At Wagner, we found this to be a recurring problem when we tried to view them as a class. Preparations must be made to put the [digital] stories in a suitable format for projection or, if necessary, a process needs to be established for going off-campus to a suitable site when digital stories are to be showcased. (Wagner College)

Planning Matters

Assessment experts often talk about the cycle of assessment. Inherent in these discussions is the understanding that assessment is a circular process, and that the path followed often determines the success of the project. Many of the institutional members of the Engaging Evidence Consortium made observations about the importance of careful planning.

The purpose of the campus project at **Cedarville University** was to develop methods to assess critical thinking developed through the general education curriculum and other applicable curricular areas. The project team attributed the success of the Cedarville project to proper planning. When asked to provide advice to colleagues, they stated:



Founded in Boston in 1899, **Simmons College** (Massachusetts) serves approximately 1,900 undergraduate women. The college also offers coeducational programs for more than 3,000 graduate students, including the nation's first MBA program designed specifically for women.
www.simmons.edu



Established in 1885, **Springfield College** (Massachusetts) is guided by its humanics philosophy and its mission of educating students in spirit, mind, and body for leadership in service to others. More than 5,000 traditional, nontraditional, and international students study at its main campus and at its school of human services campuses across the country.
www.springfieldcollege.edu

We would encourage colleagues to plan the details of an assessment project clearly and thoroughly at the beginning. It is important to agree on whether or not a goal is comparing results from students at different levels. If so, one rubric needs to be used instead of a different one at each level. Also, although at times it may cost more monetarily, using a standard assessment package already available, such as a critical thinking exam, may use fewer resources overall than writing and developing a rubric. Last, it is important to collect enough data to make them useful when analysis begins. We have experienced the fact that thorough planning helps a project to develop as well as possible.

Similarly, the project team at **Saint Joseph's College** (IN) noted important principles in planning for assessment projects. "Our lessons learned included understanding the true meaning of 'Engaging Evidence' in assessment, learning how to manage and integrate multiple sources of information, keeping a good timeline for our goals, understanding the value of quality data, and accomplishing tasks according to the timeline."

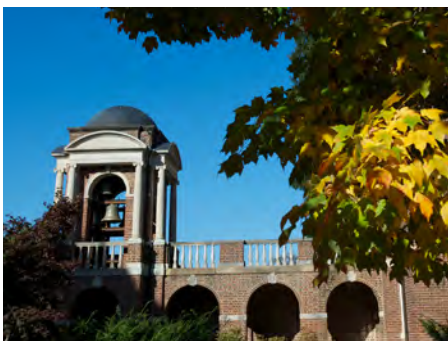
The Engaging Evidence project at **Augsburg College** examined the accomplishment of educational learning outcomes across the curriculum and in co-curricular undergraduate programs articulated in Augsburg's mission statement. The project used existing and new data sources in order to understand better the alignment among the institution's mission statement, general education curriculum, and co-curricular program. When reflecting on the success of its project Augsburg reported:

One of the lessons learned during this project is the necessity of planning out the different types of data collection carefully. There were moments during the project when pieces of data became available and changed the next set of questions we wanted to ask; however, we didn't always have the resources or capacity to ask the next set of questions.

At **Hilbert College**, an institutional review of capstone experiences raised questions regarding the appropriateness of current curricular outcomes that were central to the project team's action plan. Consequently, the Hilbert team recognized the need for flexibility in the planning and implementation of its assessment effort:



*The oldest private university in Florida, **Stetson University** was founded in 1883 and currently enrolls more than 4,000 students at its main campus and satellite centers. Stetson offered the first college of law, school of business, and school of music in Florida and was the first private university in the state to integrate.*
www.stetson.edu



*Since 1901, **Sweet Briar College** (Virginia) has educated women on its 3,250-acre campus, which serves as a “landscape for learning” in the arts, humanities, and sciences. The college offers academic programs in more than 40 areas of study, including graduate teaching degrees for both men and women.*
www.sbc.edu

First and foremost, our advice to colleagues is to remain flexible in developing and implementing an action plan for a project of this sort. As our experience resulting from the faculty’s need to review and revise the liberal learning outcomes demonstrated, being prepared to cede control of the project to the faculty ultimately revealed a more fundamental goal that needed to be addressed before the project could proceed.

Keep It Focused

During the fourth Engaging Evidence Consortium webinar, Charlie Blaich and Kathleen Wise from the Center of Inquiry at **Wabash College** provided guidance and suggestions for Consortium members as they were prepared to complete their campus projects, encouraging Consortium members to “take heart,” as improving student learning takes time. Further they warned participants of the tendency to keep gathering and analyzing data ad infinitum. They cited the adage, “don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good,” and concluded that while there are never enough data, what is needed is sufficient information to guide improvement. Blaich and Wise exhorted Consortium members to “finish strong,” advice that encouraged institutions with especially complex projects.

The goal of the **Concordia University Chicago** project was to analyze existing general education assessment data and develop a new structure and process for assessing general education outcomes. The multi-faceted project included a comprehensive analysis of longitudinal data, sharing the results with various stakeholders, and engaging faculty in assessment conversations to enhance their knowledge and understanding of student learning across the campus. Once this initial phase was completed, the team prepared a curriculum map for mission specific outcomes and developed assessment tools that were aligned with these outcomes. When the Concordia team members reflected on how they completed such an ambitious project, they concluded:

One of our challenges was whether to stop our old processes while implementing the new general education outcomes. The two processes ran simultaneously. That was too ambitious and demanding for a mid-size institution with limited resources. One of the lessons learned was to keep it simple. We also were cautious about spreading faculty too thin when they may be required to serve on two or three assessment committees. We built all the assessment committees on existing structures to avoid duplication of efforts and prevent additional workload for faculty members who are already overloaded with committee work.



Founded in 1884, **Trine University** (Indiana) is a private university located on a 450-acre campus in Angola. Serving over 2,400 students, the university offers more than 35 programs at its main campus, online, and at its regional education centers.
www.trine.edu



Trinity Christian College (Illinois) provides a Christ-centered liberal arts education to nearly 1,400 students through more than 70 programs of study, various pre-professional programs, master's degree programs in counseling psychology and special education, and the adult studies accelerated program.
www.trnty.edu

Like Concordia University Chicago, **Shenandoah University**, **Morningside College**, and **Anna Maria College** undertook complex projects. These teams offered similar advice to colleagues who might undertake challenging assessment projects:

Our plans were too ambitious, and although they helped us to think through the scope of a problem, we found that it made more sense to take smaller, discrete steps than to implement a grander plan given other changes that were taking place in parallel.
(Shenandoah University)

First, try not to get bogged-down in the assessment details. Keep the focus on the bigger picture. Discuss student learning more in terms of what we think is happening, instead of what we know beyond any doubt is happening. Research is often messy, and decisions must be made with imperfect information. Waiting for 'perfect' information is a decision also—a decision to do nothing.
(Morningside College)

It is very easy to want to do it all. A narrow focus provides easier methods of assessing teaching and learning as well as program effectiveness. (Anna Maria College)

Maintaining the focus of an assessment project by completing targeted goals is one strategy for making projects more successful and sustainable. The overall goal of the **Lesley University** project was to develop a cross-college strategy for collecting and evaluating evidence of how required internships contribute to general education outcomes. When Lesley team members were asked to share advice with other colleagues undertaking a similar project, they remarked:

We would advise colleagues to have modest goals that they can realistically complete and not to collect more data than they can use. The CIC team was united in its recommendation not to "bite off more than you can chew!" Although we initially considered collecting additional data from alumni about their internship experiences and from other experiential learning opportunities such as study abroad, we were pleased with our decision to focus. We focused only on internships and on selected general education outcomes. Even with the narrow focus, the rich data provide more opportunities for analysis, interpretation, sharing, and use than we have had time to pursue, which reaffirms the need for a narrow and clear objective in data-collection projects. Analyzing and using data take time!



Founded in 1794, **Tusculum College** is Tennessee's oldest college and enrolls approximately 2,500 total students. Tusculum is one of only five colleges in the United States following a "focused calendar" course system in which students take one course at a time with each semester consisting of four blocks.
www.tusculum.edu



Established in 1854, the **University of Evansville** (Indiana) is a private liberal arts and sciences-based university with a full-time undergraduate enrollment of approximately 2,300. The university's diverse student body represents 41 states and 54 countries.
www.evansville.edu

The notion that completing assessment projects takes longer than anticipated was another common theme.

We cannot emphasize enough the need for faculty, administration, and staff to have time to do this work. Eight faculty members were given a course release apiece to do this work. These individuals were asked not only to design a new course, but to complete programmatic assessment and action research. Calibrating, assessing, discussing the results, and making changes as a result of the data all take significant time. (Franklin Pierce University)

Everything takes longer, is more difficult, and more complex than it at first appears. This is true in home renovations and especially true with team-implemented, institution-wide academic projects. Take this into account when writing proposals and planning roadmaps. A corollary: Scale development is more difficult than creating and administering a survey instrument. (Tusculum College)

We also recommend that you set a schedule and identify meeting dates and times in advance. The busy-ness of the semester quickly eclipses items that are not time-critical. (Trinity Christian College)

This has been a year of learning and learning to go slowly. We thought we had constructed a very reasonable plan for the Engaging Evidence project; what we would recommend to others embarking on similar journeys is to expect the unexpected, to plan years ahead of time, and to plan small. (University of Mount Union)

The Value of Institutional Collaboration

Over the past several years, CIC's data initiatives have developed into a series of robust programs and activities that are now widely recognized as valuable services to member colleges and universities. CIC has extensive experience with team-based, capacity-building workshops, such as the Data and Decisions Workshops (co-sponsored with the Association for Institutional Research) on the use of data for strategic decision making. More recently, CIC successfully completed the CIC/CLA Consortium, which embedded a "culture of assessment" at 47 participating institutions, refined the methods used to assess student learning, and identified "best practices" for the improvement of student learning. The Engaging Evidence Consortium was developed from the important lessons learned through these initiatives, one of which was that assessment and institutional change can be aided greatly by collaboration among institutional teams. Engaging Evidence Consortium members provided some insights about the power of inter-institutional collaboration. Key elements are necessary to ensure the success of a consortium:



Established in 1846, the **University of Mount Union** (Ohio) enrolls nearly 2,200 total students in 61 undergraduate areas of study and two graduate programs. Affiliated with the United Methodist Church, the university is located in Alliance, 70 miles from Cleveland and 80 miles from Pittsburgh. www.mountunion.edu



Founded in 1883, **Wagner College** (New York) is a private liberal arts college that enrolls about 2,300 total students. The college's signature curriculum, the Wagner Plan for the Practical Liberal Arts, combines three levels of interdisciplinary learning communities with practical internships and community service. www.wagner.edu

1. Create an environment in which institutional representatives can work with one another and share valuable advice from their experiences. Having colleagues from similar institutions discuss a range of issues, from logistical challenges to the selection of an appropriate assessment measure to making suggestions for the implementation of curricular revisions, were elements of the Engaging Evidence Consortium that were valued by participating institutions. Several institutional reports reflected appreciation for the discussions.

Perhaps most importantly, we learned that the challenges we face as members of academic communities are fairly universal in nature and scope and that we do well to see ourselves as part of a vast network of institutions committed to improving student learning. And although our institutions are undeniably unique in certain respects—whether parochial, ideological, sociological, geographical, cultural, or fiscal in nature—what we share in terms of challenges and opportunities surely outweighs whatever differences may exist. (Christian Brothers University)

The opportunity to participate in this Consortium has been invaluable to our ability to achieve these goals, especially on such a short timeline. The chance to meet with colleagues last year in DC allowed us to evaluate and modify our project based on comparisons to other institutions and helped strengthen our goals. (Sweet Briar College)

During the CIC poster session last year, a few of our colleagues mentioned that a stand-alone information literacy course taught by either our librarians or one professor may not infuse the curriculum. This would have in fact been the case. Since we had a multipronged approach by expanding the cause to include training of the faculty, FYS instruction, and increasing the majors with significant information fluency components, it seems to have been a successful endeavor. (Wilson College)

Based on feedback from the CIC Consortium in the summer of 2012, the Lynn University team collaborated with faculty to create the five core Dialogue courses to be implemented into the evening division. (Lynn University)



Located on a wooded ocean-view campus, **Westmont College** (California) is a private Christian liberal arts college in Santa Barbara. Founded in 1937, the college serves more than 1,200 students today. www.westmont.edu



Founded in 1888 by Lucy Wheelock, an educator committed to children's social and health needs, **Wheelock College** (Massachusetts) is a private college that offers 15 undergraduate majors and 22 minors, nine graduate programs, and a number of non-degree program options to nearly 1,400 students. www.wheelock.edu

2. Provide the necessary resources to consortium members as they are undergoing each phase of their campus project. Completing assessment projects requires a variety of resources—from logistical support to access to national assessment experts to support for data analysis. It can be difficult for smaller institutions with limited staffs to assemble all of the resources needed to support assessment activities. Yet a consortium can augment resources at multiple institutions in an efficient and effective manner.

The Washington, DC, conference was a valuable learning opportunity for our faculty members who were novices at assessment. As a result, they were better able to communicate the value of engaging with evidence of student learning and to help demystify the process and attend to the fears that their colleagues had about assessment. (Champlain College)

Participation in the CIC Engaging Evidence Consortium formalized and incentivized our writing assessment initiative. We are very grateful to have participated in this group. The resources made available to us through the meeting last summer and the small grant this spring were essential to meeting our goals and constructing an exciting plan to move forward with deeper assessment. (Wheelock College)

3. Provide an additional measure of accountability by encouraging institutional participation in and contributing to consortium goals and outcomes. Providing consortium members with common tools, such as project timelines and action plans, and holding members accountable for contributing to the larger consortium outcomes assists institutions in completing their own individual campus projects. The **Lasell College** final report best summarized the importance of this aspect of the Engaging Evidence Consortium.

There is no question that the formation of an action plan with a timeline and our sense of accountability to the Consortium kept us on course and on topic, while also allowing sufficient flexibility for us to modify our plan and timeline when warranted; in fact, the Consortium timeline may have enabled us to move forward more quickly and imaginatively than we might have otherwise. (Lasell College)



Founded in 1821, **Widener University** (Pennsylvania) is a metropolitan university comprised of eight schools and colleges leading to associate, baccalaureate, master, and doctoral degrees. More than 6,300 undergraduate, graduate, and law students attend Widener, which has a main campus in Chester and three branch campuses.
www.widener.edu



Founded in 1869, **Wilson College** is a Presbyterian-affiliated coeducational liberal arts college located in south-central Pennsylvania. The college offers bachelor's degrees in 24 majors and master's degrees in education, the humanities, and accounting.
www.wilson.edu

Next Steps

All of the 40 participating institutions reported success in completing their campus projects to make use of evidence to improve student learning. Many institutions reported remarkable progress and all plan to continue this important work. For example, **Central Methodist University** reported that the completion of its project gave rise to a new and more ambitious agenda.

As a part of increased faculty awareness as to the importance of why we assess—as much as what we assess—faculty members have begun to review the General Education Assessment model and have realized that it is quite complex and really does not address what they want to know—is the student well-rounded? Are they truly receiving a liberal arts foundation to their professional education? Faculty members are now rethinking both their general education outcomes as well as the assessment measures.

Similarly, **Marlboro College** reported,

We now have one academic year's worth of online data of student responses to Sophomore Review questions that address the four mission-related topics of studying broadly, developing a global perspective, writing, and participating in the community. We anticipate continuing to collect these data from sophomores every semester and doing additional analyses with more students. . . . In addition, we now have information from current faculty as to what they individually mean by the concept of "studying broadly," which will be useful to determine whether our students' definitions differ greatly from faculty expectations. This can lead to better advising of all students earlier than the semester in which they complete their Sophomore Reviews.

Many institutions reported that participation in the Engaging Evidence Consortium generated momentum to expand their projects. The final report from **Our Lady of the Lake University** (TX) echoed this sentiment.

We now have momentum with regard to the use of assessment tools to increase learning. We moved from a system of 'assessment of learning' to a system of 'assessment for learning.' We are using our assessment results and making strategic, data-informed decisions about how to increase learning for our new students that will be entering in fall of 2013.

Team members from the **University of Evansville** highlighted the challenge of sustaining this important work. “The biggest challenge going forward will be to sustain the high level of effort required to institutionalize these activities. . . . Nevertheless, the discussions of how to improve curricula and assessment materials will always be expensive in terms of faculty time and institutional support.” Although supporting assessment of student learning can be costly and time consuming, when the results of these activities can be tied directly to improving student learning, the return on the investment is high. The **Clafin University** final report best summarized this lesson: “Develop a thorough assessment plan with timelines and responsible parties early in the process. And then enjoy the learning that comes with improvement!”

The CIC Engaging Evidence Consortium has demonstrated the importance of using evidence to improve student learning. This report has highlighted the lessons learned by the 40 participating institutions. The work of the Engaging Evidence Consortium stands as yet another example of how the assessment of student learning and best practices in the use of data can be enhanced through collaboration among institutions.

References

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Engaging Evidence Consortium

Participating Institutions

Anderson University (SC)
Anna Maria College (MA)
Augsburg College (MN)
Cedarville University (OH)
Central Methodist University (MO)
Champlain College (VT)
Christian Brothers University (TN)
Claflin University (SC)
Coker College (SC)
Concordia University Chicago (IL)
Franklin Pierce University (NH)
Hilbert College (NY)
Husson University (ME)
Lasell College (MA)
Lesley University (MA)
Lynn University (FL)
Marlboro College (VT)
Messiah College (PA)
Morningside College (IA)
Nebraska Wesleyan University

Our Lady of the Lake University (TX)
Saint Joseph's College (IN)
Saint Leo University (FL)
Schreiner University (TX)
Shaw University (NC)
Shenandoah University (VA)
Simmons College (MA)
Springfield College (MA)
Stetson University (FL)
Sweet Briar College (VA)
Trine University (IN)
Trinity Christian College (IL)
Tusculum College (TN)
University of Evansville (IN)
University of Mount Union (OH)
Wagner College (NY)
Westmont College (CA)
Wheelock College (MA)
Widener University (PA)
Wilson College (PA)

