

When Hope and History Rhyme: Good Work in Hard Times

The Big Question for the Teagle Foundation over the past year, as for so many other organizations, has been whether it is possible to do good work in bad times. The financial crisis, often described as being of historic proportions, could be bad enough to push aside hope for holding on, let alone making improvements. It's been a rough time financially, especially for the poor, the unemployed, the homeless, families trying to make ends meet, kids hoping to get to college, and colleges trying to serve them well. Even immensely wealthy universities have felt the pain: along with storefront community organizations, tuition-dependent colleges, vulnerable associations and collaboratives, they have had to ask whether it is possible to do what needs to be done when red ink is spilling.

At the Teagle Foundation, we are convinced that it is urgent to move forward, and possible to do so, even when the budget says "Hold." Improving student engagement and learning in the liberal arts and sciences is a good test case of this hope-filled conviction. It's not easy, but we are seeing it happen, even amid the enormous difficulties we are all facing at this moment.

PRESERVING CAPITAL

At the Teagle Foundation, as in many of our grant recipients, the financial crises of the year have taken their toll. At a superficial level we have worried, of course, about preserving *financial* capital, though it seems wrong to dwell on the matter when others are feeling *real* pain. (For our endowment results, see our most recent audited financial statements.) But while economic downturns of the sort we have experienced this past year are unquestionably times to conserve assets, we at Teagle recognize that our assets are not exclusively financial ones. For us, they include the expertise of our staff, the momentum that has developed in our grantmaking, and the carefully cultivated relationships with our grant recipients and other allies who share our mission of bringing student learning and engagement to the highest possible levels.

Thus while we have scrutinized budgets—not least our own—with special care this year and tried to economize in every appropriate way, the Teagle Foundation has not made deep cuts in staff or grants during the 2009 fiscal year. In fact, we have increased our commitment in our College-Community Connections program (CCC), an initiative that seeks to enhance the overall college readiness of New York City high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds. CCC is a program that provides support for two connected areas of work: college preparatory programs at community-based organizations (CBOs)—which play a crucial role in getting students ready for college—and partnerships between these organizations and colleges or universities. By working together—we believe—CBOs and colleges can leverage their unique strengths and expertise to design innovative, discipline-based, academic programs that can help high school students develop the learning skills they need to succeed in college. This, clearly, is important work, but it is also work that can easily be pushed aside when the economy turns sour. Knowing this, we increased the number of funded partnerships from ten to twelve and offered three-year grants to ensure financial stability for these projects.

One additional grant we made under the auspices of CCC was to the Partnership for After School Education (PASE) for an initiative that responds to the needs of CBOs during these troubled

economic times. PASE will offer workshops and technical assistance to help CBOs develop strategies that will enable them not only to keep their doors open, but to maintain the high quality of their programs in a time of reduced resources.

While I said that we've not made deep cuts in our grantmaking, it is true that our disciplined endowment spending procedures have constrained our work, and will continue to do so for the next few years. We expect that new grants made in the near future will be modest, very often pilot or planning grants.

The history of other periods of severe economic difficulty shows, we believe, that these can be times when creativity is energized, new approaches and products developed, and sustainable solutions found for perennially difficult problems. Taking a cue from business and industry, we find that judicious risk-taking during bad times has a long history of success: according to a report from the Kauffman Foundation, more than 50% of *Fortune 500* companies were started during recessions or bear markets. And improving student learning requires just such judicious—and creative—approaches. It is, in my view, the most important challenge facing higher education today and it can't wait for the top of the next business cycle, the next capital campaign, or the next bubble.

GETTING STUDENT LEARNING TO THE TOP OF THE AGENDA

The needle measuring student learning at the undergraduate level appears to have gotten stuck some decades ago. There is little good evidence to show that all the hard work that has been put into modifying the curriculum, expanding programs and centers, providing better student counseling and other services, building new buildings, remodeling old ones, installing computer and internet facilities, and so on, has actually resulted in gains in student learning at the national level. Surely these are worthwhile efforts, but at the national level, they have not moved the needle. Something is missing. What is it and how can it be put to use—soon?

In almost any organization, the less important has a perverse way of eclipsing the more important. The minor details that demand immediate attention push aside the big issues crucial for long term success. When that happens in higher education, improving student learning gets displaced by worries about deferred maintenance, alumni relations, the football season, and, inevitably, parking. There seems too little time to focus on the central objective of any college or university—the advancement of learning.

A deeper analysis might find these colleges and universities caught between two conflicting paradigms. One claims that if the inputs are high enough—if we select students and faculty wisely, provide adequate financial aid and good salaries, library and research resources—good results will follow. The other paradigm values affordability, access, retention, graduation rates, etc., but takes, as its starting point and central value, student progress toward ambitious cognitive and personal goals. It stresses the importance of the expectations an institution conveys to its students and the practices that help them achieve their best. It seeks to reclaim words such as “attainment” and “accountability,” grounding them not in the number of students admitted or degrees awarded, but in the quality of student engagement and learning.

The two paradigms are not contradictory, but one has to decide where to allocate resources—time and effort, even more than money—if we are to get the improvement of student learning where, in my view, it belongs: at the top of the academic agenda.

LEVERS FOR CHANGE

The principal impediment to improving student learning is not lack of funds but lack of focus, imagination, and know-how. In a bleak financial landscape, that may sound like whistling in the dark. I am convinced, however, that what counts is not how much money you spend, but how you spend it. At Teagle, we have identified and watched our grantees use “levers” that have the potential to change, and indeed improve, undergraduate student learning.

Systematic Use of Evidence: During a brief thaw in the Midwest winter, I went out to the well-named Hope College in Holland, Michigan and joined in a faculty retreat focused on improving the engagement, curiosity, and learning of their students. With support from a Teagle grant, the faculty at Hope studied the comparison between their College’s results on various national surveys and those of peer institutions. While the College was doing very well on some measures, in others it was clearly lagging. Rather than make excuses, the faculty looked in depth at the data, convened focus groups of students, and joined in a retreat to determine how they could do better. The know-how generated by our philanthropy helped in this process, but the key was the faculty’s determination to focus on the evidence and use it to make improvements.

At Teagle, we have found that many institutions—like Hope College—are accustomed to doing a lot with a little. The inputs may vary, but students achieve high levels of learning. In that effort, the systematic use of evidence is extremely important, guiding the allocation of time, effort, and resources, but also helping all to share in the satisfaction that comes when students engage and learn. Moving from evidence to action is not always easy—data can tell many stories, point to many avenues of action, and understanding what they are saying takes effort—but it is worth it. A series of grants—our second round of funding focused on the systematic improvement of learning—promise to demonstrate this point once again.

Multi-Institutional Collaboration: On another trip to the Midwest, I saw renewed evidence of the power and appeal of cross-institutional collaboration—another powerful lever for change. In September, I went to Beloit College to talk with the leaders of four institutions (Beloit, Knox, Monmouth, and Ripon Colleges) in a Teagle-funded collaborative project, “Assessing the Value Added to Liberal Education by Academic Majors.” I found instead that almost every college in the Associated Colleges of the Midwest was represented at the meeting—so many, in fact, that the opening session had to be moved to a local church to accommodate everyone! Even more pleasing to me was the energy of the group. They had not come to be cheered on by some foundation executive, but to share ideas and strategies to increase student learning.

From Knowledge to Know-How: Even relatively small grants—when they are used in focused and thoughtful ways—can produce important results. And those results in turn provide encouraging confirmation of our strategy of “knowledge-based philanthropy,” that is, philanthropy that uses its resources to develop ideas, approaches and know-how that can be widely used and applied. Perhaps the best example comes from grants made just over a year ago for *Collegia* on Student Learning. These are seminars that explore the new knowledge that psychology and other cognitive sciences can bring to bear on student learning. Two groups of *Collegia* are now under way thanks to Teagle support. One set of grants supports collaborations among groups of liberal arts colleges. Another supports projects at individual research universities. The *Collegia* are interdisciplinary and intergenerational and often include graduate students as well as senior professors from education, medicine, the arts, and sciences. Their goal is not to produce more research, but to see how what is already known can be put to use in the classroom. Although these grants are still in progress, they are already leading to exciting “findings” such as those from the *Collegium* at Columbia University.

High-Impact Practices: The findings that are emerging from the *Collegia* can easily be tested, even in a chilly financial climate. Usually they don't cost a penny; they simply require more effective use of faculty time. Other practices may be more expensive, but even in these cases, the challenge is often not to invent something new, but to make better use of what is already at hand. A good example comes from a friend and ally of the Foundation, George Kuh of Indiana University. A careful analysis of evidence collected from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has identified ten "high-impact practices" that can invigorate student engagement and learning, and produce benefits in student retention and graduation rates. Professor Kuh's work was not the result of a Teagle grant but, like the findings emerging from the *Collegia*, it is very much in accord with the systematic, evidence-based approach that Teagle has been encouraging.

The Department and the Major: Between the high-impact practices described by Professor Kuh and the classroom-based findings emerging from the *Collegia* is a crucial link in the effort to improve student learning—the academic department and the major. In the past, the major has often been defined in contrast to liberal, or "general" education. But in recent years, the understanding of liberal education has come to focus on long term, cumulative learning goals such as critical thinking, effectiveness of written and oral expression, moral reasoning, etc. Such ambitious, long-term goals are not reached in a course or two, or even a year or two. They require a close co-ordination between "general" education and concentration in an academic discipline. Following this new formulation, the major gains new importance as part of a truly robust liberal education.

With Teagle funding, six disciplinary organizations explored this new relationship between the major and liberal education. Each of these fields—biochemistry and molecular biology, classics, economics, English and modern foreign languages, history, and religious studies—has now presented a White Paper examining these issues and the journal *Liberal Education* has devoted an issue to them. This is not the place to attempt a summation except to note two interesting, common denominators among the reports. First, almost all of them adopted without hesitation robust, long-term goals similar to those set forth by the Association of American Colleges and Universities in its LEAP project. Second, most of the groups working on these projects confronted the question, "How do we know whether it is working?" a crucial (but often neglected) question in all attempts to improve student learning. In effect, thinking about genuinely robust educational goals made thinking about assessment inescapable.

In another Teagle-funded project, faculty from two disciplines—classics and political science—have been asking the question, "How well are majors doing in helping students reach these robust goals?" Working with Rachelle Brooks of Northwestern University, these faculty have developed discipline-specific instruments to assess the extent to which their students' critical thinking and post-formal reasoning skills improve over time. The planning is now complete and very shortly the study will begin at twelve institutions, involving close to 1,000 students and 50 faculty.

There is clearly much work still to be done in this area, but every reason to believe that it will be productive work. As Jo Beld of St. Olaf College found, after initial resistance, many faculty find that looking closely at student learning at the departmental level has made their work more enjoyable and meaningful.

Big Questions and the Disciplines: Scholarship in the arts and sciences has become increasingly specialized over the years, enlarging the knowledge base in these fields, but perhaps also losing something of its resonance for college teaching and learning. During the past year our grantmaking has encouraged a fresh look at the work of the scholarly disciplines and their engagement with the "big questions" of meaning and value. In that way, we hoped, the scholarly vigor of these fields

might be more readily linked to the needs and interests of undergraduates. This work is still in a very early stage, but a series of grants suggests some approaches that we expect will prove stimulating and invigorating.

New Leadership at Every Level: Using these “levers for change” takes skills, determination, and leadership. At every turn, we see more clearly that the ultimate success of the projects we have been supporting depends not so much on funding as on the leadership of the individual projects. Leadership is crucial at every level, from the meeting of the smallest department to the grandest national policy setting. Over the past year at the Teagle Foundation, we have seen encouraging developments at every level, far more than in previous years. With Teagle funding, the Association of American Colleges & Universities convened a warmly received summer institute that aims to develop faculty leadership at the departmental level for improving student learning.

At the national level, the idea of a co-ordinated strategy among organizations that care most about improving student learning has gone from a gleam in the eye to an incorporated “New Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability.” Under the leadership of David Paris and a hard working and distinguished board, the “Alliance” will help national higher education organizations co-ordinate their efforts, develop programs to encourage and recognize exemplary efforts, and above all, put a national focus on the improvement of student learning. The Teagle Foundation is proud to have provided start up funds for this promising new organization.

It is, however, also important to ask where the next generation of academic leadership is coming from and how alert it will be to the powerful changes that are taking place, not least in the improvement of student learning. Instead of trying to impose some top-down strategy of leadership development, what would happen, we wondered, if two relatively young faculty took the lead in designing a forum that would build on the energy, the imagination, and the concerns of other talented faculty with clear leadership potential? Sarah Igo of Vanderbilt University and Peter Struck of the University of Pennsylvania have now done exactly that in a Teagle-funded leadership forum that will convene thirty “Teagle fellows” twice a year over a three-year period. Each gathering will feature a seminar on a specific topic in educational theory, practice, and policy. Fellows will be encouraged to think about how the ideas they discuss can be applied in their teaching, and will be given some funding to run small initiatives on their home campuses.

HISTORY VERSUS HOPE

The history of American higher education since the second World War is to a significant extent shaped by the interaction of two developments—a dramatic increase in number of students entering colleges and universities, and efforts to move away from rote learning to higher levels of engagement, more active forms of learning, and hence deeper levels of curiosity, creativity, and a life-long love of learning. We need both of these, but they are not always easy companions, especially when resources are scarce and competition fierce. The need and desire to make college possible for all students can push aside efforts to energize and enrich the educational experience on our campuses. Conflict between access to college and success once there can diffuse and distract and lead to stagnation in graduation rates, as well as indications that even those who graduate have sometimes failed to develop the skills and capacities they will need and benefit from in their future lives.

Somehow, access and success must move forward together. It is not an unreasonable hope. The colleges and universities with which we have worked at Teagle are making great efforts to provide student aid in a difficult time and *simultaneously* improve the quality of education they provide. It’s not easy. But sitting down together with peers, focusing on ambitious goals, and using the evidence

that can guide progress toward them seem to lead us to a sort of healing well, a place of reconciliation and co-operation. When I look at the reports of our grantees, and when I talk to friends and colleagues who have rolled up their sleeves to make it happen, I find good reasons for hope.

TRANSITION

The hope is real but the challenge persists. We have a long way to go. Much of the work that has been undertaken through Teagle grants in recent years is still in progress, and may take several more years to come to fruition. But I take great encouragement from the leadership emerging throughout higher education, and not least at the Teagle Foundation, where its new leadership is committed to efforts to extend and enrich the educational experience of American college students. It has been a pleasure this year to welcome onto our Board four new directors, all of whom have a deep commitment to American higher education—Barbara Benioff Friedman, Andrew Delbanco, Grant Porter, and Cornelia Small. It is also a source of great encouragement to know that my successor as president, Richard Morrill, is a person deeply committed to both access and attainment in higher education. As a Board member, he has been involved in the development of Teagle's recent programs, and his appointment assures continuity and judicious exploration of new ways to advance the Foundation's mission. He will confront a constrained budget for the first few years of his presidency, but his presidencies of Salem and Centre Colleges and of the University of Richmond have demonstrated the creativity and imagination of his leadership. I take great pleasure in the thought that I will be succeeded by such a distinguished and deeply committed educational leader.

CODA: HOPE AND HISTORY RHYME

Not just change but improvement: that was what I was hoping for when I started my work at the Teagle Foundation almost seven years ago. It was a lot to hope for, even in the years of prosperity, and more so when the economy went sour. But Seamus Heaney has it right, I think, in *The Cure at Troy*, his adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. He writes about revenge and reconciliation, which he sees both in Greek tragedy and in his native Ireland, and those aspects of his work can resonate with the inequities and missed opportunities in higher education. Even more powerful, though, is his hope for the future—a hope that speaks to my own aspirations—and the aspirations of many—for our students here in America:

**History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.**

**So hope for a great sea-change
on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
is reachable from here.**

To me that says it all. I thank all those—the Teagle staff, its Board of Directors, friends, allies, grantees throughout American higher education, and beyond—who have made it possible for me to stand at this healing well and watch the wave begin to well up, and hear hope and history rhyme.

W. Robert Connor
President

Works cited

Heaney, Seamus. *The Cure at Troy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991.