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IMPROVEMENT MATTERS

In 2007, with the support of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, City University of New York (CUNY) Chancellor Matthew Goldstein launched a major initiative to address a pervasive problem—consistently low graduation rates among students in the system's community colleges. Backed by major funding from the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity, CUNY invested $19.5 million to create ASAP, Accelerated Study in Associate Programs.

Like many ambitious efforts focused on large-scale improvements, the program's architects started by asking some basic questions: What barriers are preventing students' persistence and how can we remove them? What support do community college students need most to succeed? What is working well that we can build on? Guided by questions like these, ASAP has always had a clear focus; in the words of Donna Linderman, university dean for student success and ASAP executive director, "It all begins and ends with the student" (Linderman, 2016).

Just nine months after Goldstein and Bloomberg announced the program, ASAP launched with a cohort of 1,132 students at six community colleges, providing a set of core program elements: Full-time enrollment, block-scheduled first-year classes, course-taking within cohort groups, increased financial aid, "intrusive and mandatory" advisement, a student-success seminar, career services, and tutoring services. ASAP's leaders

emphasized systemic alignment of resources and services. Every detail mattered; because most students were very low income and struggled with the full cost of attending college, ASAP provided critical financial resources to remove barriers to full-time attendance, including free unlimited Metrocards, textbooks, and tuition waivers to cover any gap between financial aid and tuition and fees (Linderman, 2016).

From the outset, ASAP staff committed to being data driven and results oriented and to refine the program model year by year. The results have been impressive for the more than 12,000 ASAP students to date, justifying the plans to scale to 25,000 students by 2018/19 with support from the City of New York:

- ASAP students graduate at more than double the rate of non-ASAP students enrolled at CUNY community colleges (53% vs. 23%);
- That higher graduate rate reflects both ASAP students with developmental needs and those who enter the program fully skills proficient;
- Students from underrepresented groups appear to derive the most benefit from the program;
- After seven years of operation, 64% of ASAP students had earned either associate or baccalaureate degrees as compared to 42% of comparison-group students (ASAP, 2015).

The research firm MDRC recently conducted a five-year random assignment study of ASAP with 900 students from three community colleges who entered with developmental education needs. MDRC found that the three-year graduation

rate for ASAP students was nearly double the graduation rate of control group students. MDRC stated that "ASAP's effects are the largest MDRC has found in any of its evaluations of community college reforms" (Scrivener, Weiss, Ratledge, Rudd, Sommo, & Fresques, 2015).

Henry Levin of Teachers College of Columbia University conducted a comprehensive cost-benefit study of the program and found that the cost per graduate for ASAP was lower than for a comparison group (Levin and Garcia, 2012). A cost benefit analysis found that "for every dollar invested in ASAP by the taxpayer, $3.50 is returned per associate degree conferred in the form of increased tax revenues and social services savings, and for each dollar invested by the ASAP student, $12.20 is returned through increased earnings" (Levin and Garcia, 2013).

Programs like ASAP change the life trajectories not only of individual students but also of entire families and communities. One recent ASAP graduate worked as a car service dispatcher before completing his GED and then enrolling in community college to demonstrate the value of an education to his own children. After completing his associate degree through ASAP (while his daughter also was enrolled as an ASAP student), he received a scholarship to earn a four-year degree and now works full time in the Fatherhood Academy at CUNY's LaGuardia Community College (Linderman, 2016).

ASAP is an important example of what can happen when institutions have strong commitments both to improving quantitative institutional outcomes and to improving the individual lives of students and their families through tailored, consistent, student-centered support. ASAP's success illustrates the dynamic relationship between individual and institutional

improvement. Students attend CUNY to improve their lives in meaningful ways—their professional prospects, their economic situations, their understandings of the world, their capacities to lead. Although those goals motivate student effort, institutions cannot rely on students alone to carry the burden. Systematic work to improve institutional performance creates environments where students are able to learn and grow. Indeed, a large study of student success in college found that effective institutions are characterized by "positive restlessness," which is "an acculturated wariness that what and how we are doing now can well be improved" (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010, p. 146). This "we can do better" ethos not only works dynamically to improve the institution but also models for students the processes of growth and change.

Improvement Matters: Action Principles

1. Recognize that assessment is fundamental to improvement.
2. Focus assessment on improving what matters most.
3. Commit to using evidence to inform changes.
4. Involve everyone in the process of making change.
5. Adapt best practices from elsewhere.
6. Cultivate an ethos of positive restlessness.
7. Model the process of improvement for students and the institution.

Recognize That Assessment Is Fundamental to Improvement

Understanding is the first step toward improvement. Until you understand what is, you cannot identify a reasonable path toward what could be.

Unfortunately, assessment in higher education too often operates in a culture of compliance. Within this framework, the primary purpose of assessment is to produce results to satisfy external bodies; "instead of faculty members and institutional leaders declaring that improvement of student success and institutional performance was the guiding purpose for documenting student performance—and being encouraged and rewarded for doing so—the interests of others outside the institution" shape what data is gathered and how it is evaluated (Ikenberry & Kuh, 2015, p. 5). Indeed, at some institutions the assessment director is like a modern-day Paul Revere, riding through campus to raise the alarm, "The accreditors are coming! The accreditors are coming!" After marshaling the troops for a formal review, the outsiders retreat and life on the campus green returns to normal. This assessment-for-others orientation has created a chasm between routine assessment practices at many institutions and the people on campus who are most able to act on the results of those assessments to improve student learning—the faculty, staff, and students. Peter Ewell (2009) aptly describes this as the difference between assessment for proving and assessment for improving.

With improvement as the goal, assessment practices can take a wide variety of approaches. Thirty years ago, Richard Light began the Harvard Assessment Seminars as a monthly dinner conversation among colleagues, including faculty and staff from neighboring institutions, along with a sprinkling of Harvard undergraduate and graduate students. Over dinner this group would identify a question about students' collegiate experiences and then create a plan to gather and analyze relevant evidence, often combining institutional data with student interviews or focus groups. At a subsequent dinner, the group discussed the assessment process and results, brainstorming ways to act on what they had found. Over time, this evolving group not only developed more sophisticated understandings of their students and their campuses but also created a number of powerful interventions to improve learning (Light, 2001). Though many assessment initiatives do not occur over dinners with colleagues, all institutions can figure out creative ways to use assessment processes for a larger purpose.

Accreditation is sometimes blamed for the pervasive culture of compliance, but a host of institutions have effectively used accrediting requirements as a lever for improvement (Ewell & Jankowski, 2015). North Carolina A&T State University, for instance, cultivated a culture of inquiry linked to its Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) reaffirmation processes. The institution's teaching center and its innovative Wabash-Provost Scholars Program brought together faculty and students to examine assessment data, always asking faculty and students, "What do you make of this?" These conversations sparked further research, some of it conducted by trained

students, and multiple initiatives aimed at evidence-based improvements in the student experience (Baker, 2012).

By focusing on improving, assessment becomes "problem-specific and user-centered" (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015, p. 12). Those characteristics make it possible for academics to do what they do best, applying their critical capacities to understand and systematically act on complex issues related to both student learning and institutional performance. In other words, assessment as improvement is a key to student and institutional effectiveness.

Focus Assessment on Improving What Matters Most

Assessment can be a powerful lens for improvement, but only when it is focused on what matters most. Effective assessments require clearly articulated goals that are linked to the institution's mission and priorities. Doing this, however, can be difficult. Many institutions have developed complicated systems for collecting and collating data that have little value to the institution. Many residential campuses, for instance, track the number of programs offered by resident assistants without having any evidence that these programs have meaningful outcomes, let alone are attended by many students. As the sociologist William Cameron (1963) noted more than half a century ago, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted" (p. 13).

With central goals as the focal point, effective assessment collects and analyzes evidence that reflects authentic performance, not isolated data points. St. Olaf College in

Minnesota threads this needle by supporting department-level assessment. When the department of religion sought to assess its students' performance on a core disciplinary and liberal arts goal, the capacity to "form, evaluate, and communicate critical and normative interpretations of religious life and thought," the faculty worked together to evaluate senior essays. When the management studies concentration weighed the merits of team-based pedagogies, which gave students practice with challenging group work but also consumed considerable class time, the faculty compared student performance on individual and group quizzes. In both cases, assessment led to significant improvements, including new writing assignments in religion courses and expanded use of team-based learning in management (Beld, 2010).

While classroom learning is fundamental, in some segments of the campus, such as food service, customer service is a central priority. To improve in this area, targeted assessment is essential. For instance, Campus Dining at the University of Missouri-Columbia uses a mystery shopper program to gather immediate feedback on the quality of daily encounters students have with staff in multiple dining units across campus. Each semester, more than a dozen students are hired and trained to conduct focused, weekly shops and then to provide feedback on the degree to which measurable performance standards are being met from a customer point of view. The standards clearly reflect the department's mission, targeted service objectives, and quantifiable standards that staff helped to create. Feedback from the mystery shoppers is promptly shared with the involved staff, and common themes (both positive and negative) are highlighted in unit-wide

communications and trainings. Exemplary stories are shared on the department's Facebook page and through Twitter, reinforcing to staff and students alike that Campus Dining has and meets high standards. This process of systematically gathering and using timely feedback bolsters staff pride and supports a culture of improvement among the staff of Campus Dining—and also models an improvement ethos to students and colleagues across the university (Kiehn, 2015; Schroeder, 2001).

Commit to Using Evidence to Inform Changes

Although institutions have invested vast sums and great hopes in the power of data to serve as a catalyst for change, research demonstrates that evidence alone is rarely sufficient to spark meaningful reform (Banta & Blaich, 2011). Nobel Prize–winning physicist Carl Weiman and his colleagues, for example, conclude that research results seldom are "compelling enough by themselves to change faculty members' pedagogy" in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (Wieman, Perkins, & Gilbert, 2010, p. 13). Indeed, the authors of a recent meta-analysis found strong evidence that reinforced previous research that students learn more in STEM courses characterized by active learning pedagogies rather than lectures. These authors seemed exasperated when they concluded, "If the experiments analyzed here had been conducted as randomized controlled trials of medical interventions, they may have been stopped for benefit—meaning that enrolling patients in the control condition might be

discontinued because the treatment being tested was clearly more beneficial" (Freeman et al., 2014, p. 8413). This problem of individuals and institutions *not* applying what is learned from research is so pervasive in higher education, extending far beyond STEM classrooms, that one of the primary findings from the 49-institution Wabash National Study is that "it is incredibly difficult to translate assessment evidence into improvements in student learning" (Blaich & Wise, 2011, p. 11).

Change is hard, of course, but the human and organizational tendency to remain static may not be sufficient to explain why so little is done with so much evidence in higher education. Charles Blaich and Kathy Wise (2015), building on the work of philosopher Gilbert Ryle, suggest one persuasive explanation. Put simply, they argue that a significant gap exists between "knowing that" and "knowing how." Applying this to the research on STEM teaching, many faculty know that well-executed active learning pedagogies will help their students learn more, but these faculty may not know how to teach in these different ways. Although faculty development programs can change that, STEM faculty at some institutions also might know that teaching innovations are not necessarily a priority in the institutional reward structure, and even at a teaching-focused institution, they may not know how to document their pedagogical innovations for promotion and tenure review. The space between knowledge and execution, in other words, can be a significant barrier to innovation.

Kuh and Hutchings (2015) diagnose another potential cause for the lack of action on assessment data—initiative fatigue. Some campuses and some groups hold tightly to the

way they've always done things. However, a larger problem may be that already busy and overstretched colleagues often do not see the value of a new initiative, so they do not know why they should commit to change. Sometimes this is a communications problem, but in large and complex organizations, it often results from hosting multiple programs with competing purposes. Public institutions in Oregon, for instance, recently participated in the Western Interstate Collegiate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) Passport Project to improve student transfer experiences while simultaneously working to apply the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs) and the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics to high-impact practices. These same universities also joined the Multistate Collaborative Assessment Initiative (MCAI) and received a Lumina Foundation grant to adapt the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP). Each of these initiatives has the potential to contribute to lasting positive change, but many faculty and staff (or readers of this paragraph!) might reasonably wonder whether and how to engage with this complicated set of overlapping projects (Kuh & Hutchings, 2015, p. 189).

To counter initiative fatigue and to enhance the chances of evidence-based action, institutions and individuals should commit to these five practices (Blaich & Wise, 2011; Kuh & Hutchings, 2015; Walvoord, 2010):

1. Establish clear improvement priorities for sustained focus.
2. Communicate about the educational value and anticipated outcomes of each initiative.
3. Gather enough data to have a reasonable basis for action.

4. Foster conversations about and engagement with that data so that those in positions to act have the opportunity to understand the evidence and shape the actions.
5. Identify and celebrate successes along the way.

Hope College in Michigan used an evidence-based process like this to address National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results that indicated their students did less homework per week than peers at similar institutions. Hope's assessment director presented this data along with other evidence about students' academic efforts, including narrative results from student focus groups, to the full faculty at a dinner meeting. After discussing the meaning of this assessment evidence, faculty decided to have each department develop two specific strategies meant to enhance academic challenge in its courses. Departments reported on their strategies at a campus-wide event, and many faculty changed their teaching to prompt greater student effort. NSSE results from subsequent years demonstrated the effect of this collective effort. Hope students reported significantly more academic effort than on the prior administration of NSSE, and Hope students now compared favorably (in the faculty's eyes) to students at peer institutions in the amount of time they spent doing homework per week (Banta & Blaich, 2011).

Involve Everyone in the Process of Making Change

The University of Maryland–Baltimore County has long used evidence to systematically improve student performance, particularly in the STEM fields. A core strategy has been

"the insistence that all groups on campus take ownership of the challenge involving student performance and persistence" (Hrabowski, Suess, & Fritz, 2011, p. 26).

Developing this kind of ownership requires giving a range of groups a voice in shaping both the process and goals of improvement initiatives. Too often, assessment is done to or for people rather than with them. Students, for instance, complete surveys like NSSE or develop portfolios of their best work yet may not know what happens with or as a result of these efforts. Trustees often review assessment reports that provide a lot of information but offer little nuanced or benchmarked evidence to support program oversight or appropriate board action (Sullivan, 2015). To counter this, improvement initiatives should be designed from the start as partnerships among all of the relevant parties.

Effective partnerships draw on the distinct expertise and perspectives of different participants (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). The diversity of the group is an asset, bringing new lenses to see the common work. The Students Assessing Teaching and Learning (SATAL) program at the University of California–Merced illustrates the possibilities of this kind of partnership. SATAL trains and supports a cohort of a dozen or so undergraduates who act as formative assessment consultants to faculty and programs. For instance, SATAL-conducted focus groups with students helped faculty in the applied mathematics program better understand the student experience in their senior capstone, leading to significant improvements in both that course and the curriculum. In another case, SATAL's interviews about student experiences in first-year courses complemented institutional data to support changes in teaching practices across the first year. In these ways, SATAL students not only gather assessment data but also help faculty and programs make sense of that evidence, bringing

powerful and informed student voices into important conversations about teaching and learning on campus (Cain & Hutchings, 2015).

The University of Exeter in the United Kingdom has taken this partnership model to a different level with the Students as Change Agents program (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). This program evolved out of an initiative like SATAL as participants realized the potential of students not simply participating in assessment and improvement activities but also initiating and co-leading such work. Through a number of Staff/Student Liaison Committees (SSLC), Exeter students propose possible projects to improve some aspect of the university. The SSLCs select ideas to pursue and then gather relevant information from diverse perspectives in order to make recommendations for change. Because the SSLCs are supported by institutional resources and embedded within governance structures at the university, significant improvements often emerge, including shifts in pedagogy, curricula, staffing, and student support services.

Adapt Best Practices from Elsewhere

Assessment often focuses internally. That is essential, but institutions also should look externally to identify effective practices at other institutions and within the scholarly literature that could be adapted to meet local goals and needs.

Many students and institutions, for example, struggle with developmental math and statistics. While the particulars vary by campus, common challenges exist including student habits and beliefs that make success unlikely. Drawing on research and

a multi-institutional network of faculty, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching sponsored the creation of a set of strategies to support students in cultivating productive persistence. Both scholarly studies and classroom experience demonstrated that students' beliefs about themselves as mathematical thinkers and about their sense of belonging in a mathematical environment had profound influence on their performance in developmental courses. The results of the productive persistence interventions are striking, dramatically increasing the rate of student success in roughly half the time (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Yamada, 2014). As the number of faculty and campuses that adapt these interventions in their own local contexts grow, the results vary within a small range, while the impact of this best practice spreads to thousands of students in many states (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2015).

The University of Missouri–Columbia went through a similar process of learning from others when senior leaders were charged with substantially increasing the student engagement of large numbers of first-year students without increasing costs. At a conference, one of the team members from Missouri attended an impressive presentation on assessment of nonresidential learning community outcomes at the University of Washington (UW). Members of a small group from academic and student affairs who were inspired by the presentation visited UW to learn first hand about the practices that produced these outcomes. Adapting elements of UW's program and other approaches found in the literature, they created a cross-functional team to design, implement, and assess first-year residential learning communities at Missouri. A pilot

program with 240 students grew over a decade to involve more than 4,000 students annually. Ongoing assessments using unobtrusive measures (e.g., retention, GPA, graduation rates) coupled with national surveys such as NSSE provided persuasive evidence of the efficacy of the program and resulted in it becoming one of the institution's signature undergraduate initiatives, even though the original idea came from someplace else (Schroeder, 1999, 2013).

Cultivate an Ethos of Positive Restlessness

Improvement requires not only specific actions but also a certain orientation toward ourselves and our institutions. Although we need to act with resolve, we also need to remain humble—what scholars studying improvement refer to as the assumption that your ideas and practices are "possibly wrong and definitely incomplete" (Bryk et al., 2015, p. 163). Or, as one of the authors was told by a campus leader during a very positive accreditation visit, "We are pleased you think we are doing well. We want you to help us figure out how we can be even better."

Scholars studying diversity and disability have highlighted the importance of this self-critical attitude. Some institutions have taken a check-list approach to such work, establishing an office or program and then, in essence, ticking that topic off the college's to-do list. Shaun Harper's (2009) synthesis of research on Black male undergraduate student engagement reveals the perils of *not* being positively restless. Harper demonstrates that many individuals and institutions seem to see only the perceived deficits of Black male students, which leads to a particular "orientation (focus on stereotypical

characteristics associated with the culture of disadvantage and poverty), discourse (lack of preparation, motivation, study skills, blaming students and/or their backgrounds), and strategies (compensatory educational programs, remedial courses, special programs, all focused on fixing the student)" (p. 148). Harper shows how this often prompts institutions to treat all Black males the same, ignoring what could be learned from the experiences of high achieving Black male undergraduates if campuses switched from expecting deficits to looking for assets.

Similarly, attention to architectural design for deafspace (Bauman, 2014; Edwards & Harold, 2014) by researchers and faculty at Gallaudet University, the world's only university designed for deaf and hard of hearing students, offers significant lessons about space, proximity, and contrast for anyone interested in creating classrooms and informal learning spaces that promote face-to-face community.

> Within these deaf-friendly (and, indeed, hearing-friendly) spaces, class sessions often begin with a simple ritual of establishing visual connection before teaching begins. As students enter, the professor will establish eye contact with each, and students are encouraged to greet one another in a similar way. Bags, cups of coffee, and other visual distractions are removed, opening up the visual field to encourage direct connection. Then, throughout the class, eye contact is maintained as much as possible, facilitated by the design of the space and thoughtful choice of pedagogy.

> The student (and faculty) experience in such a classroom, sometimes called a "Sensory Commons" at Gallaudet, can feel dramatically different from what happens daily at other universities, as students may drift anonymously through classrooms and across campus. (Felten & Bauman, 2013, p. 374)

As the universal design movement has demonstrated, regularly questioning assumptions related to disability frameworks often yields positive insights with broad implications for all students, not just the ones labeled disabled (Burgstahler, 2015).

Successful programs and institutions often display this type of positive restlessness. In 2011, Purdue University launched a major initiative, Foundations of Excellence, to improve the experience of first-year students on campus. Although the institution's first- to second-year retention rate hit an all-time high that year at 90.6%, faculty and staff believed that more could and should be done. A 200-member task force spent a year working on this project, guided by high-level leadership including the vice provost for undergraduate affairs, the vice president for student affairs, the chief diversity officer, and the associate vice president for housing and food services. Task force recommendations yielded changes in the core curriculum, advising and student support services, faculty development, and other areas. The task force also established robust assessment processes to ensure that future improvements to the first year would be informed by evidence. Although the task force had completed its work, members recognized that their

aspirations required continuing to look for ways to improve (Hamon, 2012).

Model the Process of Improvement for Students and the Institution

Paying attention to the processes that support improvement has two distinct benefits: (a) We can actually get better at getting better, and (b) we can model and teach students (and others) to learn how to think about and work on improvement in many aspects of their own lives.

The field of improvement science began with industry and medicine and recently has been adapted for education by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. This approach rests on a set of principles, three of which are particularly appropriate here:

- *Make the work problem specific and user centered:* Effective improvement efforts typically focus on concrete, clearly defined problems that are of concern to the people involved in the effort.
- *See the system that produces the current outcomes:* Whatever you are trying to improve exists within a context, and that context matters. By looking at both specific problems and the environment that produces and sustains those problems, you will be more apt to recognize both resources that can aid your improvement efforts and challenges that will need to be addressed.

- *Use inquiry to drive improvement:* Inquiry is a powerful tool for improvement, particularly at academic institutions where many people are trained and motivated by research. (Bryk et al., 2015, pp. 12–17).

Georgetown University is using a process like this as part of a strategic initiative called Designing the Future(s) of the University (Georgetown University, 2015). This project challenges the entire university community to invent new approaches to a distinctly Georgetown education, focusing in particular on enhancing the depth and quality of student learning while reducing or controlling costs. The experiments seeded by this initiative vary widely, challenging customs such as when, where, and how students earn credits toward a degree. To bring students into the heart of this endeavor, the Board of Regents Future(s) Fellows Program supports a cohort of 25 undergraduates working together with faculty and staff on sustained projects aimed at improving and reinventing the university.

By publicly modeling the improvement process and bringing students into the work, projects like this help the institution to get better and students (and others in the campus community) to develop the kinds of practical reasoning capacities that are essential to working and living in the modern world (Sullivan & Rosin, 2008).

Conclusion

Assessment is a vital tool for improvement, especially when it is used in ways that serve what matters most in the college

experience. In an era of often intrusive external oversight, many on campus are suspicious—or just plain tired—of initiatives promising change. Yet, as Charles Schroeder recently concluded in *About Campus*, "If you don't have a sense of an improvement-oriented ethos, and some commitment to a culture of evidence, then regardless of what other activities you sponsor, you're probably not going to create the kind of self-perpetuating, performance-based learning organization you desire" (Schroeder & Shushok, 2015, p. 16).

In short, a personal orientation toward and an institutional culture of positive restlessness are necessary for us to fulfill our aspirations for our students and our communities. Developing these can be challenging in a time of constraints and cynicism, but a persistent focus on what matters most—and on the vital purposes of higher education for our students and our world—can help individuals and institutions to do the hard work necessary to make positive, lasting change.

Questions for Reflection

1. How would you describe your institution's culture of assessment and improvement? How much does accreditation drive your assessment work?
2. What examples can you identify of evidence-informed action at your institution? What lessons can you draw from those examples for your next improvement efforts?
3. How (and with whom) are you sharing, on and beyond your campus, both the processes and the results of your improvement efforts?

4. How can you involve more stakeholders, including students and faculty, in improvement initiatives on your campus?
5. How can you and your institution most effectively model the improvement process for students?
6. How do you and your institution support professional development to help people and groups be more capable of using assessment for improvement?
7. How are you and your institution replicating, celebrating, and rewarding successful improvement efforts?