

To: Ron Bramhall
From: Charlie Blaich and Kathy Wise
Date: 3/27/17
RE: Follow up to our visit

Once again, we enjoyed the chance to visit the University of Oregon and meet with you and your many good colleagues from across the university. You're engaged in the best work to prepare a research university for improving student learning that we've seen. We also enjoyed the chance to talk with UO students. We appreciate how hard it is to get groups of students together to meet outsiders. But it was worth it, from our perspective, because it so nicely reinforced what we heard in our conversations with faculty, staff, and administrators.

As you know, colleges and universities in the United States vary tremendously in their curriculum, size, the kinds of programs and departments they house, how they are financed, and their lived (not stated) missions. But in terms of how they operate, there's remarkable consistency. Most of the colleges and universities that we visit suffer from thickly walled silos, myth-informed teaching, as well as structures and incentives optimized to deliver courses, not promote learning. The extent of these symptoms varies across institutions, but the fact of their existence does not.

One way to counter these chronic problems is to highlight and support the centers of excellence that promote student learning within the institution, and to find ways to "infect" the institution with new variants of these successful communities. When we visit colleges and universities where people are thinking about ways to improve student learning, we look for programs, departments, or groups that are doing good work towards that end. These "centers of excellence" can be sources of innovation and serve as examples of effective communities of practice flourishing within the cultural, structural, and budgetary boundaries of an institution.

On a good visit, we are happy to locate one strong, learning-focused community on which to build. But the most exciting part of our visit to the UO was that we observed three communities that are doing outstanding work to advance student learning and should serve as models for new programs and initiatives. Two of these communities are formal programs, the Science Literacy Program (SLP) and the Teaching Engagement Program (TEP). And the third is the innovative administrative team that you're working with.

Many of the teaching and learning centers or faculty development learning communities that we encounter are staffed by dedicated people. They are committed to helping faculty, and sometimes staff, adopt evidence-based teaching practices. Unfortunately, most of the programming we observe cuts against this commitment because it focuses on "drive by" or one-off workshops where people meet, talk about the issue du jour, and then go back to the solitude of their classrooms. Even though research shows that such programming has little impact on improving teaching effectiveness,¹ it's still the mainstay at most institutions with which we work. The SLP and TEP are distinguished, in our view, because the leaders of those two programs engage faculty in the longer-term work of educating them about evidence-based practices and then guiding their implementation of these practices. This is the kind of work that creates long-term impact on teaching effectiveness by helping faculty reconceptualize their teaching. A number of the faculty participants in these two programs with whom we spoke thoughtfully described how their approach to teaching and their work with students had changed because of their engagement in these programs.

¹ Henderson, C., Beach, A., & Finkelstein, N. (2011). Facilitating Change in Undergraduate STEM Instructional Practices: An Analytic Review of the Literature. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 48, 952-984.

Our conversations with students amplified these points. When we asked students what they learned in their general education courses, a number of them talked about the importance of learning things outside of their major and how that gave them an interesting and different perspective than what they were learning their major. They also talked about how some of their general education courses gave them an interest in a new subject, even in courses that they initially felt forced to take. These were the kind of comments that would warm the heart of general education advocates. But these same students were unanimous in saying that the impact of general education courses was based on how well the courses were taught. Good teaching, not subject matter, made general education courses engaging. And unfortunately, poorly taught general education courses had the opposite effect.

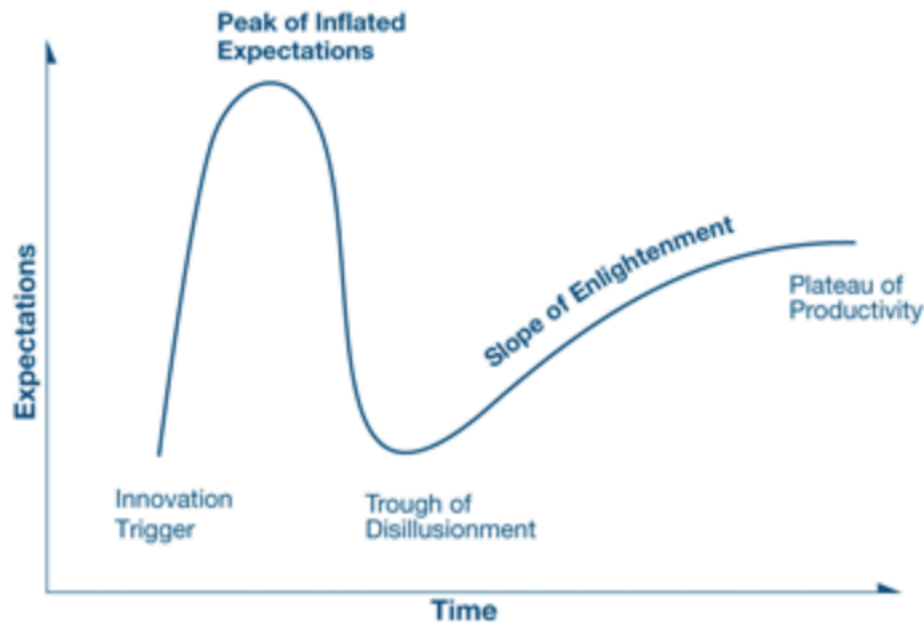
When we asked students how their high-impact general education courses were taught, students talked about a number of courses taught by faculty that we'd spoken with earlier who were engaged with the SLP and/or TEP. It was a rare and wonderful experience to start the visit hearing from faculty who've thoughtfully revised their general education courses with the help of the SLP or TEP, and then hear students talk about how much they valued their experiences in those courses later on.

Based on our conversations at the UO with the leaders of these programs, faculty who participated in the programs, our review of program materials, and conversations with some students who were in the classes that these faculty taught, we were deeply impressed. The SLP and TEP are both outstanding models that we've been describing in our subsequent visits to institutions. They are a source of strength for the UO.

The other model "program" is really more of an approach than a program. The way you're framing your work with Lisa Freinkel (Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies), the trED (Transforming Education by Design) group, and other groups on campus is impressive. It is creating an open, curiosity- and inquiry-driven conversation about student learning at the UO. From what we observed, these conversations are helping people see alternatives to the shopworn, expensive, and often ineffective improvement playbook that we've seen at so many other institutions: Let's build a new first year program! Let's create new majors or programs! Let's revise general education! New programs and curricular structures may be useful, but they may also be a way of kicking the let's-improve-student-learning can down the road.

In the Wabash National Study, the principle driver of student learning was the quality of in- and out-of-class teaching. Good teaching, by faculty *and* staff, was far more important in shaping student learning than the kinds of curricula or high-profile programs that institutions had. In our experience, creating programs to help faculty and staff adopt and refine evidence-based teaching can have a faster ROI than engaging in the many-year political contest of redesigning the curriculum or spinning up new programs. Even in the most beautifully redesigned curricula, random factors like course availability, faculty availability, and even where students land in registration lotteries can play a bigger role in student learning than the curricular architecture enshrined in the course catalog. Likewise, new programs, even when they are based on successful models at other institutions, can take years of work on tuning so they are effective for the particular students that an institution serves and the unique institutional environment in which that program is situated. And if teaching isn't where it should be, a new program is just a new bottle for an old, and less than optimal, teaching wine.

Our experience at many institutions is that new programs or curricular revisions often follow the tech world's Hype Cycle (see below).



Bold new programs or curricular structures are adopted to solve a student learning challenge. But it turns out that these shiny new objects are often far more challenging to implement, both financially and politically, than people imagined when they proposed them. A wicked learning improvement problem has been exchanged for a wicked implementation and sustainability problem. Once they've been created, it takes time and effort to develop faculty and staff so that the way they teach extracts the potential of the new programs. But this is the very kind of faculty and staff development work the institution put off to install the new structures. It's not that universities shouldn't innovate, but it is important to remember that student learning will improve only if the institution devotes time and resources to developing the teaching skills of its community. New programs and curricular revisions don't eliminate that work, they merely put off the Hype Cycle's "plateau of productivity" to a later point.

This is why we appreciated the conversations you are facilitating with your colleagues. From what we heard, your colleagues are taking a backwards design approach and asking real questions about what might help to improve student learning at UO without fixating on a particular program or curricular change. Maybe such changes will prove to be necessary, but the conversations were not starting from that premise, and that's healthy. In our view, the teams that you're working with combine an openness to seeing, with critical clarity, things at UO that are obstacles to improvement, with a simultaneous optimism about the chances for success given those obstacles. They embody the "Stockdale paradox" by being willing to confront the "brutal facts" of current reality while having faith that improvement is possible.

In our view, the successes of the SLP and TEP point to a model of improvement for the institution by spawning additional learning communities, perhaps in departments, divisions, and even areas like academic advising, in which people have a chance to read and discuss evidence-based teaching practices, and then implement and get feedback as they adopt some aspect of those practices in their work. This would, in essence, create multiple "local" professional development learning communities, such as a learning community of advisors or a learning community in the social sciences or humanities, that support reflection on and the implementation of evidence-based teaching practices. The UO, like many large, public research universities is sprawling and almost pathologically decentralized. Top down approaches don't work for widely dispersed communities with strong local control. Creating communities of practice around teaching that are distributed like the agricultural extension

units at land grant universities is a way of creating common messages and practices in dispersed places. But the only way to ensure there are consistent messages is to create a group that will guide the work of these communities of practice.

On the administrative side, we suggest that you and your colleagues continue the good work on thinking about wicked problems. The only suggestion we made during our visit, and one we reiterate now, is to think about forming a “learning-centered” workgroup that would guide the work of the SLP and TEP offshoots. Such a group would bring together people who a) have expertise in gathering and making sense of institutional assessment and survey evidence, b) have experience working on faculty and staff development of teaching skills, and c) have a few resources and the imprimatur of the administration. This combination ensures that the new faculty development efforts are informed by people who’ve successfully led such efforts before, by evidence on strengths and weaknesses of student learning and student experiences from assessment, and by what is and is not possible from an administrative standpoint.

Once again, we appreciated the opportunity to visit the UO and meet with so many thoughtful and engaged people. We hope this memo is helpful, and we are happy to follow up in any way that is useful.