Center of Inquiry

WABASH COLLEGE

To: Penny Brunner and Karin Roof
From: Craig Pepin (Champlain College), Ed Wingenbach (University of Redlands), Kathy Wise (Wabash College), and Charles Blaich (Wabash College)
Date: April 30, 2012
Re: Follow-up memo from our visit to the College of Charleston on March 19-21

We appreciated the opportunity to visit the College of Charleston to discuss the work that the team has done on their Wabash Study project and to offer suggestions for ways that the team might continue to move the project forward. During the three days that we visited campus, we met with a variety of faculty (including people from the First-Year Experience, the Deans' Assessment Committee, and the Assessment of Institutional Effectiveness Committee), students (including peer facilitators from the FYE and members of the SGA), and members of the Academic Affairs leadership team.

For the comments below, we start with the goals that the College of Charleston outlined in its letter of application to the Wabash Study – "The Wabash Study offers the College the opportunity from the start to build an evidence-based culture of inquiry around the enhancement of existing programs to improve student learning."

In collaborating with institutions in the Wabash Study, the Center's goal is to help build institutional capacity to gather, make sense of, and use evidence to strengthen the quality and impact of liberal education. We are not as concerned with the particular liberal education outcome or outcomes on which an institution chooses to focus as we are with the development of faculty capacity to use evidence to improve their courses, departments, and programs.

In our experience, this "capacity" means that there is an institutional commitment to creating and supporting venues for faculty to reflect on, discuss, and use evidence to create and evaluate educational experiments in their courses, programs, and departments on a continual basis. While the support for effective assessment resides within an institution's administrative structures, the actual work of using evidence to effect changes that benefit student learning lives with the faculty.

First-Year Experience (FYE)
We were impressed by the rubric work described in the "How students grow on the outcomes identified" report for the Wabash Assessment Portfolio, as well as our conversations with FYE coordinator Chris Korey about plans for building on this rubric work in the coming year. (We understand this work will be done with Chris Warnick who could not attend the meetings.) Although the results of analyzing student papers may not have pointed to significant improvement in integrative learning during the first year, the project created a number of practices that, if continued, will help create the kind of assessment capacity that we described above. Specifically, cultivating faculty interest in:
- sharing student papers with their colleagues,
- sharing assignment prompts with their colleagues,
- reading students' papers from other classes,

- developing and applying rubrics, and
- engaging in conversations about what they learned from applying these rubrics.

Most importantly, we were impressed by the willingness of faculty to consider discouraging results without trying to "explain them away"—a response that happens at many other campuses with which we work. Like many effective assessment projects, the process of reviewing student work and applying a rubric became as much about faculty development as it was about gauging student learning. Chris Korey and Chris Warnick plan to build on this approach to assessing the FYE in the coming year, and we applaud this endeavor.

In our view, an important next step will be to reduce the number of outcomes for which FYE seminars and learning communities are responsible and to focus assessment efforts on those outcomes. The only way to sharpen the educational impact of the approximately 120 FYE courses that the College of Charleston offers each year is to align outcomes across courses, assess student learning on those outcomes, and engage in the kinds of evidence-based faculty development conversations that started this year with the reading workshop for FYE papers. A critical first step in this process is to decide on a small number of common outcomes for the FYE.

Conversation with faculty

The faculty with whom we met indicated an impressive interest in and openness to using assessment to improve educational effectiveness. While this was a self-selected group, the range of departments represented and the enthusiasm with which they engaged demonstrates that faculty at the College of Charleston are well-positioned to take ownership of assessment activities. The faculty were particularly interested in using assessment to improve their curriculums, their courses, and their teaching. They seemed optimistic that collecting and evaluating evidence of student learning would generate positive changes to their programs. As the College of Charleston works to deepen faculty engagement with assessment, it will be helpful to continue reminding faculty of the difference between academic research and the collection of useful evidence of student learning; as our conversation clarified that the purpose of assessment is to generate improvements, and gathering evidence is a means to that end rather than the end itself, the enthusiasm of this already engaged group grew appreciably. The faculty's eagerness to engage with one another in order to improve their programs and their sincere desire to develop more effective courses and curricula represents a significant opportunity for the College of Charleston to make meaningful progress in assessment. The College should look for ways to take advantage of this opportunity by further empowering faculty to take ownership of assessment planning, implementation, and oversight.

Conversations with students

We met with four Peer Facilitators in the FYE and were impressed by their dedication and high level (for college undergraduates) of pedagogical sophistication. The Synthesis Seminar, which they lead, appears to have well-described and perhaps ambitious outcomes, and the two credit training course for facilitators was cited by the facilitators as giving them excellent preparation for their work. The organization of facilitators into teams with weekly team meetings, the Peer

Center of Inquiry

WABASH COLLEGE

Facilitator weekly reports, and the student surveys conducted in class seem to provide an excellent structure for creating and managing a motivated and well-trained group of facilitators and a quality experience for first-year students. Moreover, the Peer Facilitators conduct student surveys within the Synthesis Seminars which could provide data for assessment activities. Overall, it was clear that the Peer Facilitators we met were strongly committed to personally connecting with first-year students and helping them navigate the difficult waters of their first semester(s) in college.

One thing to consider for the future is allowing experienced Peer Facilitators a little more freedom within the structure of the syllabus to pursue topics and discussions in the classroom that the students find particularly thought-provoking. The structure of the syllabus might be overly constraining in certain circumstances and perhaps could be loosened up when Peer Facilitators sense that their students' needs and interests fall in a slightly different area than that specified by the syllabus on a particular day.

Peer Facilitators also noted that spring semester Synthesis Seminars can be considerably more difficult, because after first-year students have already had a full semester of college, many of them see less utility in the material about campus resources and the transition to college. Although this is fairly common among first-year college students, this could possibly be addressed by moving more of the seminars to the fall semester, or by slightly reshaping the structure of spring seminars and adjusting the Peer Facilitator training to reflect these changes.

While our conversation with the Peer Facilitators focused on their role in the FYE, our conversations with other students, including first-year students currently enrolled in a Synthesis Seminar and students in the Student Government Association (SGA), covered their experiences at the College of Charleston more broadly, including why they chose to attend the College of Charleston. It was clear that the college's location in Charleston is a significant draw for many students. On one hand, some students reported coming to the College of Charleston for "the beaches and shopping." Then there were the highly motivated and engaged students in the SGA, who cited specific academic programs at the college as one of the reasons they picked the College of Charleston. However, when we asked the SGA students why students in general come to the College of Charleston, their first response was "the location." The college's location in such a desirable city presents certain challenges for faculty and staff because students may be thinking of their college experience in terms of social opportunities in the city at least as much as, if not more than, academic opportunities. We saw this in one student's response to our question about the biggest challenge of her first-year of college, which she reported as "figuring out how to get to the best beaches." Other students described classes that were not especially challenging or in which it really wasn't necessary to attend class to do well. Overall, the College of Charleston students with whom we spoke were bright and capable, but they seemed to be less engaged in the academic side of college than we expected given their talents. The College of Charleston may have some work to do so that the academic side of the institution lives up to both the qualities of its locale and its students.

Center of Inquiry
WABASH COLLEGE

Summary reflections on our visit and recommendations

Our overall observation is—the great work of Penny Brunner and Karin Roof aside—that there is little in the way of formative assessment taking place at the College of Charleston. However, the good news is that there are individuals throughout the college who are interested in creating assessment opportunities and are beginning to recruit and encourage faculty to join them. Based on our conversations, the College of Charleston has a significant number of faculty who are open to the idea of assessment. This is an important opening to build on. But the College of Charleston still has a long way to go to translate these initial faculty conversations and interest into a systematic program that impacts their classes, departments, and programs. We offer the following suggestions for ways that the College of Charleston might move forward in its assessment work.

1. In terms of the Wabash Study, a good path forward might be to consider moving away from a focus on integrated learning to continue the process of capacity building in the FYE, which includes developing faculty conversations, refining outcomes, and moving forward on assessment—in essence, building a faculty learning community around the FYE. The initial focus on integrated learning was useful because it generated productive conversations between faculty from different departments and led to further inquiry into the FYE. We believe that it might be useful to continue these conversations by shifting the focus of your assessment efforts to the stated outcomes of the FYE. The initial list of FYE outcomes is quite broad and may include more outcomes than can realistically be addressed in one, or two, courses. As a first step, it might be useful to review the outcomes that faculty have addressed in their FYSM and LC courses to date, to begin a conversation about refining the list of outcomes to a smaller and more manageable number that can be addressed across courses in the FYE.

2. You have just started the assessment process in the FYE. While good things have happened, and there appears to be some momentum from faculty, the process is far from over. Faculty have gathered a lot of information and started conversations to make sense of that information, but they need to use the evidence to take concrete steps to improve the program, refine the learning goals, sharpen assignments, create more common outcomes, and assess the actual outcomes of the program. We would suggest not moving onto something else (e.g., the "next phase" of the Wabash Study) until you have helped faculty in the FYE move from first conversations about assessment evidence to reflecting on and using that evidence to improve the impact of the FYE.

3. As you consider your next assessment project, we suggest focusing on an activity that will create more faculty capacity for, and ownership of, the process of assessment. The FYE is a great starting point. The rubric workshop with FYS and LC papers engaged a number of faculty from different departments and generated interest in continued assessment work. The next assessment project should create similar interest from and engagement by faculty. Based on our conversations with faculty members during this visit, supporting departments' assessment plans would be a natural next step. This would also help the college respond to SACS' concerns about assessment and prepare for the interim accreditation report. The Office for Institutional Effectiveness and Planning already has assessment plans from all departments and programs, and there appear to be some willing faculty in many departments. Building on the outreach you've

Center of Inquiry

WABASH COLLEGE

done with departments over the past year, you could use the assessment plans to choose a number of "fertile" departments to work with, based on the strength of their plans and the general willingness of people in the department to engage in assessment. Our suggestion would be to take the same approach you have with the FYE and work with selected departments to develop the same kinds of conversations (including shared work among departments) to build their capacity to move from a "plan" to actually using evidence to improve the quality and impact of departmental offerings. You could then use these departments as models for the assessment process, and bring more departments into the process the following year.

We should also note that several potential "next stage" assessment projects were mentioned during our visit, including curriculum mapping and looking at study abroad and capstones. While these are all interesting ideas, we did not hear faculty interest for projects in these areas like we did in terms of the FYE and departmental assessment. In choosing which assessment projects to pursue, institutions sometimes have to choose between projects that address questions of importance to the administration and those projects that will more deeply engage faculty. For institutions that are just beginning their assessment work, especially those that are near an accreditation site visit, we suggest focusing on projects that engage faculty. The most important thing for the College of Charleston, in our view, is to build faculty capacity and ownership of assessment so that these activities will persist beyond the next SACS report and actually improve student learning.

4. It was not clear to us how academic program review connects with and reinforces the work of assessment. Periodic program review can provide a fruitful opportunity for programs to summarize and reflect upon ongoing assessment work and use evidence to develop plans for the future. The College of Charleston should consider the ways in which academic program review integrates with assessment efforts and comprehensive academic planning.

5. Before embarking on a curriculum mapping project, which can be a time-intensive endeavor, it might be useful to do things like:
- Break down institutional data by program and school so that programs and schools can use this information in their deliberations about improving the quality of their programs.
- Break down graduation and retention rates by demographic information and by program and school for the same reason that we cited in the previous bullet point.
- Examine how incoming information about College of Charleston students (e.g., SAT/ACT scores, responses on the CIRP Freshman Survey) correlates with various measures of academic success such as retention/graduation rates, measures of engagement, GPA, academic honors, participation in study abroad, etc.