EDITOR'S PAGE

An Introduction to the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

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Guest Editor

We appreciate the opportunity to guest edit this issue of *Innovative Higher Education* and offer a sample of the work being completed by the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment.

Let me begin by introducing the Center. NCTLA is a U.S. Department of Education funded research and development center. We are one of 17 centers funded through the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and have the distinction of being the only center with an exclusively higher education research agenda. Our five year grant from OERI is for $5.9 million dollars and we are currently completing year 4 of the project.

Our research agenda is disarmingly simple: to better understand the factors that facilitate student learning. To date most of those factors have been studied optimistically via isolated and individual studies. We have no quarrel with the calibre of the work but believe it is time to start assembling the puzzle — to start looking at the larger picture — to try to sort out and better understand the web of influences that affect student experiences in college.

And so, we have designed and are conducting an integrated research program. What ties it all together is a large longitudinal study, our National Study of Student Learning, which aims to measure a variety of learning outcomes for a 3,900 student cohort attending 25 different colleges and universities. These students are

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completing a battery of tests as they begin college and at several intervals during their first two years.

We believe that the factors which affect student learning exist in four different areas: the curriculum, with faculty and in the classroom, outside the classroom, and via the organizational policies and structures of the institutions they attend. These four areas are represented by the Center's four Research Programs. In total a collection of 23 separate projects and studies are underway in these four research programs.

The Research Programs and the National Study of Student Learning are linked by virtue of the fact they address the same and/or closely related issues, and in some cases, different research projects are being conducted at sites which are part of the National Study of Student Learning. This allows us to explore how one set of factors affecting student learning are affected by another set.

Our findings gain strength by virtue of this interconnectedness and because different research methodologies are being brought to bear on the same issue. For example, the quantitative National Study of Student Learning involves a site that is the object of a qualitative ethnographic case study. Few previous attempts have been made to integrate the findings of different research methodologies.

In this issue we offer a potpourri of the work in progress. The interconnections of which I have just written are not immediately, or obviously, apparent in these five articles. However, let me try to position them within the context of the Center's work which will illustrate the kind of connections we are working to make and the difficulty of doing so.

The National Study of Student Learning, coordinated by Ernest T. Pascarella of the University of Illinois, Chicago, seeks to measure learning outcomes in four different areas. Learning in these areas is being measured using modules that are part of the American College Testing (ACT) Program's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) as well as other tests. In each of these areas, there is a substantial foundation of literature and research which document the extent to which the area is (or has been) an outcome of the college education experience. Patrick T. Terenzini's article "Educating for Citizenship: Freeing the Mind and Elevating the Spirit" is a summary of findings in this citizenship area. Essentially, he lays the foundation on which the Center's inquiry in this area rests.

Estela Bensimon's article, "Communities of Difference," is a summary of her research interests in multiculturalism and diversity as