

TEAGLE AWARDS FOR SYSTEMATIC IMPROVEMENTS IN STUDENT LEARNING

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS FROM UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTIONS IN THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

The Teagle Foundation, recognizing the importance of systematic, iterative improvement in student engagement and learning in the liberal arts and sciences, is prepared to commit one million dollars or more over the next four years to assist colleges in developing exemplary programs of systematic improvement.

BACKGROUND: In his book *Our Underachieving Colleges*, Derek Bok suggested that foundations could render a great service by supporting a process of successive improvement in colleges and universities:

... Foundations could give further impetus for change by funding exemplary efforts by colleges to install a systematic process for evaluating educational progress, identifying problems, and experimenting with potential improvements. In the past, outside sources have periodically supported particular innovations, such as new uses of the Internet.... Helpful as such assistance can be, it is very different from what is proposed here. Instead of financing specific innovations, foundations would contribute to the creation of a continuing *process* to improve the quality of undergraduate teaching and learning.... (p. 332)

In effect, Bok is urging foundations and others to encourage colleges to become genuine “learning communities,” assessing progress toward ambitious goals as successive improvements are made. The Teagle Foundation believes that the process Bok envisions can significantly strengthen student learning in the liberal arts and sciences in institutions primarily devoted to undergraduate education in these fields. Any such process requires systematic assessment not as an end in itself but as part of an iterative process for the improvement of student engagement and learning. While we do not expect that all applicants will be ready to implement such a process throughout their institution, we are looking for ambitious, imaginative projects that can significantly increase undergraduates’ cognitive development in the liberal arts and sciences.

THE FOUNDATION’S GOALS:

1. To develop models that demonstrate gains in student engagement and learning through processes of systematic improvement. We presume that these will extend or complement assessment efforts already in place on campuses to achieve significantly higher levels of excellence.
2. To encourage the habit of using evidence to achieve *systematic* improvements in student learning.
3. To produce and disseminate knowledge about how colleges can best implement such processes on their campuses.

ELIGIBILITY: These grants are intended to help four-year colleges with a strong commitment to and record of success in liberal education achieve important and well-formulated educational goals. Application is by invitation only. Successful applicants will already have developed some expertise in the use of assessment and have in place a clear leadership structure responsible for advancing such work.

MEANS: We seek a wide variety of ambitious and imaginative projects backed by rigorous and systematic evaluation. While we welcome proposals that integrate such systematic improvement

into institution-wide planning, projects may focus on any area in which evidence suggests that student engagement and learning can significantly be improved through systematic and iterative processes.

We encourage but do not require collaborative proposals. Since we have found that institutions greatly benefit by sharing ideas and information with peer institutions, we encourage institutions to identify a suitable partner or two to share in the work. Such collaborations, we have found, are most likely to succeed when the participants focus on the same area and use means of assessment that allow for cross institutional comparison.

The maximum grant is \$150,000, typically over three or four years.

LEADERSHIP AND STRUCTURE: We look for strong faculty participation and leadership as well as clear indications of commitment from presidents and other senior academic leaders. The C.V. of the principal investigator(s), a description of the involvement of other faculty and staff, and a presidential statement of support are all essential.

RESOURCES: The Teagle Foundation's web site (www.teaglefoundation.org) provides bibliographical and other resources on student learning, assessment, learning organizations, and other relevant topics.

HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLES: 1) Faculty and administrative leaders at Handel College have for several years discussed the idea of systematic improvement of the educational environment on campus. They have seen interesting results emerge from the Wabash National Study, and other data collecting, but have not as yet been able to take the next step of putting such evidence to work and actually achieving demonstrable improvements in student learning. In preparing their Teagle proposal they identify two obstacles that have impeded such progress: the lack of a strong infrastructure for such work, and the difficulties departments report in using college-wide assessment results in departmental planning. Their proposal points to ways around each of these impediments. Although the college cannot at this point hire a full time "Director of Educational Improvement" a talented Vice Provost working closely with a newly appointed faculty committee can provide sustained leadership for such work. In addition, visiting consultants are identified who can help departments "drill down" and thereby use existing evidence to guide curricular and instructional changes in several departments. These changes include greater attention to student research and writing skills in the junior year and new forms of "Capstone Experiences" in the senior year. As these innovations are tried out and then carefully evaluated and compared, revisions are made resulting in significant gains in student engagement and learning in their departments. The experience gained thereby can be extended to other parts of the college's work.

2) An accreditation report recently praised Carlsberg College for its high academic quality but urged it to develop more systematic ways of improving the personal and learning growth its students achieve. When it plans to return to the campus in a few years, the accrediting organization indicates it expects solid evidence that such a process is in place and producing results. The comments lead to vigorous, sometimes acrimonious, discussions both in faculty meetings and at the Board level. Finally, it is decided to expand the means of assessment used on campus and to integrate the information gained thereby into the college's strategic planning process focused on educational goals. In looking for examples of institutions that had succeeded in similar efforts, the college finds that its old rival Tivoli College has been working on exactly such a project. Football turns out to be no impediment to collaboration between these two colleges. Each college develops a task force that includes faculty members, the director of institutional research, finance officers, student life professionals and senior administrators. A

joint steering committee helps each institution develop its own planning processes while benefiting from the ideas and expertise of the other institution. Both plans use the idea of “continual improvement” although in rather different ways. As the two strategic plans are approved and implemented, useful comparisons continue to be made, and as results are studied, it emerges that certain practices really seem to work, while others are less effective. After careful comparison over several years, the colleges make a joint presentation about what they have learned at a meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities and their discussion of best practices, published in a report in the journal *Change*, is widely used by colleges in their design of strategic plans.

THE FOUNDATION’S EVALUATION CRITERIA will include:

- The ambition and imagination shown in the approach to an important, specific and clearly stated educational goal.
- Record of assessment activities on campus and evidence of the value of these activities for your ongoing work.
- A rigorous and systematic means of assessing progress toward that goal.
- Good faculty leadership and a strong commitment from the institutions’ presidents and senior academic leadership.
- An effective plan for disseminating the knowledge gained in the project.

CONVENING: Not long after the grants are made, the Foundation will invite the leaders of funded projects to a one or two-day meeting to share ideas and approaches and meet with leaders of higher education with expertise in this area. Since a parallel RFP, developed jointly with the Spencer Foundation, has invited applications from research universities, recipients of these awards may also be included in this meeting.

SHARING OF RESULTS: In addition to the usual financial and narrative reports at the end of each year of the grant, each grant recipient is expected to develop an effective plan for sharing what has been learned with other institutions, disciplinary organizations, etc. This may take the form of a White Paper of not more than 5,000 words to be posted on the institution’s and the Foundation’s websites, or a succinct handbook of best practices, or a user friendly website, among other options. If desired, funds may be included in the budget to hire a professional writer or web designer. The Foundation, after reviewing Final Reports from various institutions, will work closely with recipients to help the results receive as much attention as possible, and adoption in other settings.

APPLICATION PROCESS: To respond to this RFP, please send a pre-proposal of 250-500 words describing the general design of your project to proposals@teaglefoundation.org no later than **Friday, February 8, 2008**. After the Foundation has had the opportunity to review your pre-proposal, we will let you know (by e-mail) whether or not your organization will be invited to submit a full proposal. If the Foundation has suggestions that may be helpful in developing the proposal, we may follow up with further e-mail or phone exchanges.

Full proposals are due on **Monday, March 31, 2008** and must include:

- A 3-4 page narrative briefly describing the area(s) in which the project will focus, and the process of experimentation / evaluation by which systematic improvement will be achieved.

- An indication, as specific as possible, of the criteria for judging the success of the project once completed.
- Expected completion date.
- A one-paragraph abstract of the project, suitable for posting on the web.
- The contact information and C.V. of the person in charge of the project.
- Letters of endorsement from the president and academic deans of the colleges participating in the project.
- A 1-2 page budget, based on July 1 – June 30 operating years. The maximum grant is \$150,000 payable over a maximum of four years. Funds may be used for all direct, but no indirect, costs of the program. Appropriate expenses include travel and meeting expenses, office and research materials and assistance, meals for working dinners or similar occasions, summer stipends for participating faculty, and reasonable honoraria or fees for visiting experts or consultants. Please show institutional cost sharing whenever possible, including both direct and indirect costs borne by the college.

REPORTS:

- Interim narrative and financial reports are due by June 30 of each of the first two or three grant years. Financial reports should follow the format of the budget submitted with the original proposal.
- A final narrative report describing how the Working Group functioned, what proved especially productive or problematic, prospects for the future, etc. In addition, there should be a final financial report following the format of the budget submitted with the original proposal. These reports will be due one month after the project's completion date.
- A publication or web presentation useful to other institutions, as described above. Publishable texts must be submitted to the Teagle Foundation by the stated completion date of the project.

SUBMISSION OF FINAL PROPOSALS:

An electronic copy of the final proposal should be sent to proposals@teaglefoundation.org by **Monday, March 31, 2008**. In addition, three hard copies of the final proposal (an original plus two copies) should be sent to

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