

Between the Ideal and the Practical

Using Assessment to Find the Balance

Rishi Sriram, T. Laine Scales, and Meghan Oster share how the assessment efforts of Baylor University's Engaged Learning Groups have led to effective advocating for program improvement as well as increased administrative support.

By Rishi Sriram, T. Laine Scales, and Meghan Oster

PERHAPS A DECADE AGO, accreditation agencies might have been satisfied with a list of student learning outcomes and some evidence that students achieved them. More and more, accreditors request evidence of *improvement*. It is not enough to merely demonstrate that what you are doing works reasonably well; you must also show that you invest in new ideas to improve your institution. This is the context in which Baylor University senior administrators approved a quality enhancement plan to strengthen the undergraduate experience. While the program developed from an accreditation requirement, it quickly became an opportunity to do something creative for the benefit of students. In the resulting program, Engaged Learning Groups (ELGs), educators aimed to increase student engagement in academics through small residential learning communities led by faculty teams.

ELGs provide opportunities for groups of three or four faculty members to create three one-credit

courses centered on an academic theme. Students take each one-credit course over three consecutive semesters, and these courses substitute for a full three-hour course in students' degree plans. To connect curricular and cocurricular learning, students in each ELG live together in a residence hall, meet in a classroom within the hall, and engage in additional programming related to their ELG classes. Students begin their academic journeys with a cohort of peers and a team of faculty that remain consistent for the first three semesters of college. The curriculum requires hands-on experiences, field trips, and a variety of activities to engage students in and out of the classroom. The program launched with three ELGs: Hispanic Families in Transition, Film and Global Culture, and Energy and Society. These courses were selected through a competitive process in which faculty teams proposed themes that demonstrated a combination of relevant scholarship, practical significance to society, and an argument for why students would want to learn about the topic. In designing the ELG concept, leaders paid close attention to the following programmatic goals:

1. Increase student–faculty interaction.
2. Emphasize active learning.
3. Facilitate cooperative learning.
4. Increase the number of undergraduate students engaging in research.

ASSESSING ENGAGEMENT

OF COURSE, NO SUCH PROGRAM CAN BE PART of an accreditation process without the promise of rigorous assessment. Conveniently, the university was already collecting data that could be utilized to evaluate the effects of ELGs on student outcomes. For instance, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness biannually administers the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to first-year students. By isolating ELG students on several variables, we were able to demonstrate that ELG students were more engaged than other first-year students in traditional residence halls in terms of academic integration, relationships with faculty or staff, social integration, and satisfaction with their college experience. In addition to the NSSE, a residential survey from Education Benchmarking Inc. measured several variables important to ELGs. We were able to demonstrate that ELG students reported statistically significant higher scores on the following variables: student–faculty interaction, satisfaction with the ability to study in residential environments, and the belief that living on campus enhances the learning experience.

But numbers can only tell us so much. We wanted a better understanding of what participants were experiencing in ELGs. In other words, why were they having positive effects? This question compelled us

Dr. Rishi Sriram spent eight years as a higher education and student affairs administrator before beginning his current role as an assistant professor and program coordinator of the higher education and student affairs graduate program at Baylor University.

Dr. T. Laine Scales is an associate dean of graduate studies and professional development and a professor of higher education at Baylor University. She lives on campus as Faculty in Residence with first-year students in the Engaged Learning Groups.

Meghan Oster is a graduate student at Baylor University. Her research interests include living-learning programs, professional development, and women in higher education.

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to conduct qualitative focus groups of those involved in the program. Because the experiences of both faculty members and students were considered important to developing a sustainable model for this program, researchers conducted separate focus groups of both groups. We recorded and transcribed the focus groups so that we could later code the data into themes that summarized our findings.

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT OUR PROGRAM

BY USING BOTH QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DATA, we gained a comprehensive perspective of student and faculty experiences with ELGs. We highlight our major findings below and explain how information gained through assessment was used to refine the program.

Goal 1: Increase Student-Faculty Contact

The focus-group data suggested that students and faculty members interacted more through the ELG program than in their other courses. However, it was not so much an increase in the amount of contact that made the difference; it was the increase in the type of contact. Students reported interacting with their faculty members outside of the classroom and being comfortable going to their offices and even their homes. Conversations between students and faculty moved more seamlessly on a continuum between personal and academic topics. Students felt like their faculty knew them, and this deeper relationship helped to form a comprehensive academic community. Both faculty and students were willing to invest more into the relationship because they knew they were going to see each other in class beyond the first semester.

Goal 2: Emphasize Active Learning

Students in the focus groups noted that they felt like the ELG was a more intellectually stimulating experience than their other classes. Learning about a particular theme, such as how energy consumption affects society, appealed to students more than just taking a particular course. Students emphasized that their faculty members seemed more engaged with the material than in their non-ELG courses, which thereby encouraged students to engage more actively with the coursework. Also, because ELG assignments were typically more hands-on, students felt as if the material was more meaningful. Faculty appreciated the opportunity to create such assignments. As an example, the Hispanic Families in Transition ELG required students to meet weekly with members of the local Spanish-speaking community in order to help them learn English as a second language. Therefore, students built relationships

with the very people they were learning about theoretically in the ELG classroom.

Goal 3: Facilitate Cooperative Learning

Faculty said that they appreciated the community aspect that the ELG brought to the classroom. Because students were engaging with each other outside of the classroom, especially in the residence halls, the classroom experience was more dynamic and integrated into the students' lives. Students were able to get together to talk about class or work on a project because of their proximity in the residence hall and common academic bond. Also, because the classes were intentionally interdisciplinary, faculty members were given a rare opportunity to collaborate with colleagues from other departments and disciplines. Therefore, a higher form of cooperative learning took place among students, among faculty, and between students and faculty.

Goal 4: Increase the Number of Undergraduate Students Engaging in Research

Students could take an optional fourth semester that centered on faculty-led research. Although this portion of the ELG has not been formally assessed, enrollment numbers indicate that few students took advantage of the opportunity.

What Went Wrong

Although we were thrilled with the ways ELGs worked, the focus groups helped us to understand what was not working as well. Due to how ELGs were marketed, we assumed that faculty understood the importance of the out-of-class experience for students. Although that assumption proved correct for some, other faculty admitted that they did not really understand the importance of such interaction until the second semester, which was too late. Consequently, some students did not believe they were getting as much faculty interaction as was advertised in recruitment materials and presentations. In addition, the creation of new courses led to some disorganization and confusion when teaching them. Faculty were clear that team-teaching is more difficult, and they felt constantly stretched when trying to collaborate on ELGs in addition to their other responsibilities. Faculty loved how the community that had developed outside of the classroom affected classroom learning in positive ways. However, professors had to adjust to teaching students who knew each other and their teachers on a more personal level. Consequently, faculty spent less class time building community but had to invest more time keeping students from socializing too much in class.

How ELGs Have Changed

Assessment showed us what worked and did not work regarding ELGs. This vital information allowed us to refine the program and propose changes to ELGs based on assessment results. In the proposed revision,

1. The optional research component would be eliminated since students rarely took the opportunity to continue to the fourth semester. Therefore, the proposal recommends other, more structured initiatives to encourage undergraduate research.
2. The ELG course would be reduced from three semesters to two semesters, comprising just the first year for students. The assessment data revealed that students perceived the first year as most important for participating in the ELG. Additionally, the residential component of the program was a particularly strong element in community formation and engagement. The program lost impact in the students' second year because students were not in residence together, highlighting the importance of integrating living and learning.
3. The ELG courses would shift toward being discipline-specific in nature. Sometimes, when interdisciplinary courses were taught, a faculty member would simply take one semester and teach his or her material without collaborating with the other professors. Centering the class on a specific discipline allows for easier collaboration between faculty members that are in the same department. This change would also allow for departments to easily give workload credit to faculty members for the ELG courses since it would be within the department's subject area. Basing ELGs within departments would also provide broader support from departmental chairs.

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT ASSESSMENT

WE LEARNED MUCH ABOUT ASSESSMENT and its usefulness through this process. We present these findings in the form of principles and practical ideas.

Know Your Constituents, Assess Your Constituents

Our initial conversations all emphasized how we would assess only students. We talked at length about the transformative possibilities of ELGs for student

learning. However, we were delayed in realizing how much faculty were learning as well. It became clear from the outset that some faculty groups had better program launches than others, but we did not know why. Therefore, we adjusted our assessment plan to include focus groups not only of our student learners but also of the faculty attempting to foster that learning. Part of the mission of ELGs included rethinking how we educate students, and we initially excluded a vital constituent from that assessment process. Only by assessing the experiences and outcomes for all involved can we understand what is needed to sustain and improve innovative educational programs.

Let Assessment Help You Find the Sweet Spot Between the Ideal and the Practical

We admit it: we are idealists. We wanted ELGs to break through the walls that divide in-class and out-of-class learning, student affairs educators and faculty, and individual departments and interdisciplinary learning. Assessment brought us down to earth a bit, but not in a discouraging manner. Instead, this assessment process taught us where to allow practical issues to take precedence over ideal values. For instance, although we advocated for ELGs to incorporate interdisciplinary themes by joining faculty from different departments, we found that the most successful ELGs were those composed of faculty from the same department. Practically, those faculty had more buy-in from department chairs, access to each other, and more time spent working together toward the goal of student learning. In interdisciplinary ELGs, both the faculty and students perceived a certain lack of synergy that hurt student learning. Therefore, we let assessment guide us in our work and encouraged more ELGs housed within a single department but taught by faculty members with different perspectives on the topic.

Put It in Writing

We also learned the value of putting things in writing. No, we do not mean contractual obligations

regarding who does what. Rather, we are referring to publishing the reports of assessment, even if only on an internal basis. Once we had completed 90 percent of the assessment process, it seemed like we knew the major findings and could articulate them appropriately. It took some determination to finish the last 10 percent and actually write a report that summarized the entire process. We were surprised at how valuable these reports became. Every year, some administrators leave and new ones arrive, and they all want to know whether programs like ELGs are worth the effort. These assessment reports were distributed time and again to convey the strengths of the program and areas for improvement. We were also surprised at how often we referred to the reports ourselves. A final, polished report was more useful than we originally anticipated.

Transition Quickly From Assessing to Advocating

We found that the shorter the time frame between the reporting of assessment and making changes based upon the assessment, the better. Attention may be the most precious resource of those empowered to make resource allocations and decisions. The time administrators want to know about the assessment results is also the time to advocate for needed changes in order to improve a program. We learned not to consider an assessment process truly finished until action steps are agreed upon based on the findings. Each year, assessment helped us improve our program, eventually leading to a *Promising Practices of Student Affairs Partnerships with Academic Affairs* award from NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. More important, when our administration understood what ELGs did for student learning through our assessment findings, they decided to extend the life of ELGs beyond the promised time frame for accreditation. And that is something we do not believe would have occurred without finding the balance between the ideal and the practical.

