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Support for High-Impact Practices: A New Tool for Administrators

By: [Adrianna Kezar](#), and Elizabeth Holcombe

Certain widely tested educational practices have been shown to have a significantly beneficial impact on student learning and success in college. And while they demonstrably benefit all students, their impact is particularly high for students from historically underrepresented groups. These “high-impact practices” include first-year experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning, community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects. The practices can take many different forms, depending on learner characteristics as well as institutional priorities and contexts.¹

As campus leaders work to integrate more high-impact practices, or to scale-up existing ones, they tend to focus their efforts on the faculty. The widespread assumption is that what’s needed most is greater faculty awareness of their value. Then, once faculty value these practices, the thinking goes, they will need shortcuts for implementing them. Faculty are busy, and if implementation is too complex, they will ignore the practices—even if they recognize their value.

Certainly, efforts to facilitate implementation are important. And indeed, over time, rubrics and other tools have been developed to support faculty efforts to design or adopt high-impact practices in their courses.² However, we have begun to question the assumption that the problem has mainly to do with faculty awareness and the availability of shortcuts to ease uptake.

National surveys of faculty, as well as surveys of faculty on individual campuses, show increasing knowledge of high-impact practices. For example, in a recent study exploring the views of faculty participants in the California State University System’s STEM Collaboratives project—an effort to improve the success of first-generation, low-income students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields—we found very high levels of knowledge of evidence-based, high-impact practices. Yet, these same faculty members noted a lack of rewards and infrastructure to support their utilization of the practices.³ National data also reveal a more general lack of structural support for teaching, particularly among the new majority of adjunct faculty who are off the tenure track.⁴ Indeed, in our conversations across various research projects, faculty increasingly tell us that institutional structures and policies outside of their control affect their ability to scale and sustain high-impact practices.

What may actually be needed most is greater awareness among *administrators* about how to support the use of high-impact

practices.

The role of administrators

As we reflect on higher education change efforts, we observe an ironic twist. Because of the power that historically has been vested in the faculty, other campus leaders often believe that, rather than mandate change, they can do no more than simply support change efforts—largely through positive rhetoric—that emerge from the “bottom up.” This belief disguises the important reality that administrators can and should act to support faculty use of high-impact practices. Classroom practices are embedded in larger institutional systems; high-impact practices are unlikely to be scaled and institutionalized if they are not supported by these larger systems.

Greater definition is clearly needed with respect to how administrators can act to support high-impact practices—not just in word, but also in deed. In various change studies, we have asked about what administrative support means on campuses. Almost universally, respondents identify motivational speeches, verbally creating a sense of priority, and the like. When asked about specific actions they might take, administrators express uncertainty about what more concrete forms of support might look like and a hesitancy to take action.

To help administrators identify specific actions they can take to support high-impact practices, we developed the High-Impact Practices for Administrators Tool.⁵ This new self-assessment tool, focused on nine key areas of support, is designed to enable self-reflection at the institutional level. It can be used to identify gaps in support for high-impact practices as well as gaps in communication about currently available support.

At some institutions, this tool has revealed significant discrepancies between administrators, who point to policies and practices already in place to support high-impact practices, and faculty or staff members, who are unaware of those policies and practices. Where faculty and staff are unaware of existing efforts to support high-impact practices, the tool can demonstrate a need for greater communication. Below, we briefly review each of the nine broad areas of support that the tool is designed to survey.

1. Individual assessment and evaluation

One way to identify a need for high-impact practices and to determine whether existing practices are working well is to help faculty become versant in assessment. Good teaching will not automatically result from high-impact practices, especially those that are poorly or incorrectly used.

Administrators should use assessment data to identify problems at the institutional level and to communicate patterns of student performance to departments and schools. Typically, faculty do not have direct access to such data, and administrators provide them with insufficient and often indecipherable data taken from institutional research reports. Moreover, most faculty requests for specific data related to questions about their students go unfulfilled. To address such problems, many campuses are creating comprehensive, user-friendly data dashboards that offer new ways to visualize, manage, and understand data. If paired with professional development to facilitate their use, these dashboards can help meet faculty needs.

Finally, administrators should identify measures of teaching excellence that recognize and reward the use of high-impact practices. Current systems that rely on student evaluations to measure teaching excellence do not encourage the use of better teaching methods. Moreover, student ratings of faculty often decline when faculty use active-learning techniques, problem solving, or intensive writing assignments, as these are more challenging and require more work and engagement on the part of students. More direct measures of teaching quality and student learning—such as observations, portfolios, and the like—will be needed as the use of high-impact practices becomes more widespread. Administrators can revamp assessment and evaluation infrastructures to ensure support for high-impact practices.

2. Mentoring and professional development

Increasingly, centers for teaching and learning that support high-impact practices are providing opportunities for professional development. These opportunities are often limited to the centers, however, and faculty requests for support to attend pedagogical conferences off campus are often denied. Additionally, most learning communities of faculty interested in exploring the use of high-impact practices are thinly supported, if at all. And mentoring is seldom supported or rewarded.

Yet, new models are emerging. For example, faculty at the University of North Carolina (UNC) who train other faculty in active-learning strategies are eligible for course releases. Over time, as faculty across entire departments are trained, support for mentoring will be limited to new faculty members. UNC is one of the few institutions that provides formalized institutional support for this type of mentoring.

3. Contracts, promotion, and tenure

It is extremely difficult to implement high-impact practices at institutions that rely on large numbers of part-time faculty. While the Association of American Colleges and Universities has developed resources to help facilitate the use of high-impact practices by part-time faculty,⁶ it is nonetheless essential to examine the composition of the faculty and to ensure the availability of a proportion of full-time faculty that is sufficient to integrate high-impact practices into the curriculum. Administrators often overlook the ways in which their own hiring patterns constrain the use of high-impact practices. Part-time faculty may sincerely want to implement service learning or intensive writing assignments, but the constraints of their positions render them unable to do so.

For many full-time contract faculty, there is no promotion schedule that encourages quality teaching. And for tenure-track faculty, promotion and post-tenure review processes rarely account for teaching quality. Specific attention to high-impact practices during post-tenure review would encourage their use. Administrators also should consider establishing a promotion schedule for full-time faculty, both on and off the tenure track, that aligns with the goal of increasing the utilization of high-impact practices. Faculty do what they are hired and incentivized to do. The hiring of part-time faculty hinders the use of high-impact practices, and current promotion structures do little to encourage them. Given that faculty have little or no control over hiring patterns, promotional schemes, or contract types, administrative support in this area is critical.

Some campuses are experimenting with new faculty models. In the University of California system, for example, administrators are increasing the number of discipline-based education researchers. Faculty in these positions are hired on long-term contracts and with security of employment, but without tenure. They conduct research on teaching at the departmental level and often across the campus in order to support innovation, and they are promoted and evaluated based on their scholarship of teaching.

4. Rewards and incentives

Administrators control financial resources that can be deployed as rewards or incentives for new work, which gives them another key lever for supporting high-impact practices. Course releases, summer salaries, seed grants, workload adjustments, and workload reallocations are among the ways rewards and incentives can be structured to promote the adoption of new teaching and learning strategies. Resources are most critical during the initial adoption phase, when faculty are altering courses to utilize the new approaches. As faculty become more expert in high-impact practices, they are able to implement them across multiple courses. If the practices are truly to become widespread, however, administrators will need to provide incentives that make time available for faculty to adopt them.

5. Facilities and scheduling

On some campuses, administrators are making structural changes to support active learning, perhaps most notably in the sciences, by incorporating technology and other interactive elements into facilities plans. Movable tables, more technology, and interactive rooms are being built as space becomes available. At Harvey Mudd College, for example, the R. Michael Shanahan Center for Teaching and Learning serves as a model environment that promotes collaborative, interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

Administrators should also examine course scheduling, an area where changes can be made at no cost. The potential for scheduling to support pedagogical change is often overlooked. Simply reconfiguring the frequency and duration of a course—for instance, from one hour three times per week to an hour and a half twice per week—can give faculty the extra time they need to implement more high-impact practices.

6. Strategic priorities, program review, and other quality-assurance processes

Faculty look to administrators for an understanding of what the institutional priorities are, where resources will be deployed, and what will be rewarded and supported over the long term. Faculty are loath to join efforts that are insufficiently resourced or that do not carry rewards. If administrators want faculty to use high-impact practices, therefore, they need to ensure that faculty are aware of resource allocations intended to make the work possible. Without adequate support, faculty are unlikely to reach out to community groups, set up service opportunities, or maintain communication with community groups.

Regular campus processes should also support the use of high-impact practices. Program review, for example, has traditionally been predicated on communication in one direction: campus-based or central administrators provide feedback on the quality

and effectiveness of departmental work. Yet, high-impact practices may not be explicitly included in these measures of quality or in other processes that set standards of quality on a given campus. Rather than simply maintaining timeworn processes, administrators should reevaluate them to ensure that their goals, standards, and measures are aligned with current strategic objectives.

7. Partners for learning

Undergraduate research, service learning, capstone courses, internships, diversity/global learning, and community-based learning, in particular, utilize partners to help amplify learning among students. Individual faculty members generally do not have the time, resources, or connections to reach out to all the different partners needed to support these high-impact practices. Administrators are better positioned to develop and sustain formal partnerships in undergraduate research, for example, or internships. International or global work can present an even greater challenge for faculty. Even in more specialized situations where faculty may feel well positioned to establish partnerships, administrators should still make financial resources available for partnership development or provide administrative support for outreach efforts.

8. Campus policies

As faculty attempt to implement high-impact practices in their courses, they sometimes run into campus policies that slow or stall their progress. For example, a curriculum committee may question newer approaches like service learning or capstones. At some institutions, curriculum committees are largely in the hands of faculty, and their leaders may not be aware of the value of new pedagogical approaches. Similarly, some institutions will not grant credit for first-year experiences, as these courses may not seem to fit into traditional academic or disciplinary categories. Yet, by designating these high-impact practices as credit-bearing courses, the institution gives them legitimacy in the eyes of students and faculty and incentivizes students to take this work seriously. Additionally, institutional policies related to how faculty receive credit for team-taught courses or which department can list the course sometimes prevent departments from collaborating on important high-impact practices, such as first-year experiences and other interdisciplinary courses.

Administrators should also ensure that grading policies are not misaligned with the goal of implementing high-impact practices more widely. For example, a department may require that faculty in all sections of a particular introductory course base their grades on uniform midterm and final examinations that do not reflect the key learning goals of a section that utilizes high-impact practices.

9. Collaborative planning

Some high-impact practices, such as capstone courses or common intellectual experiences, require collaborative planning, yet administrators often provide no vehicle for such planning or incentives for work across departments and units. As noted above, campus policies can inhibit collaboration.

Administrators should review existing administrative structures in order to remove barriers to collaborative work and encourage the creation of cross-departmental teams, shared incentive and

credit structures, and team-taught or team-created courses and learning experiences.

Administrators on many campuses are reforming campus structures to support collaboration. At both George Mason University and California State University–Monterey Bay, for example, administrators have created cross-functional teams to support greater collaboration. Further, at George Mason University, new centers have been created to help coordinate interdisciplinary work, and a blended academic and student affairs division now supports high-impact practices.⁷

Conclusion

The High-Impact Practices for Administrators Tool described in this article provides a powerful means of reflection for administrators who seek to support the broader use of high-impact practices at their institutions. The tool does have some limitations, however, particularly for administrators who operate within larger systems that constrain their ability to provide infrastructure and support.

At some institutions, collective bargaining agreements govern salary, hiring, evaluation, and promotion processes. Administrators on unionized campuses should work with union leaders to incorporate provisions that ensure these processes support faculty use of high-impact practices. Where administrators and union leaders do not have the collegial relationship needed to shape these processes, faculty who support high-impact practices should be encouraged to work with their union representatives to alter collective bargaining agreements as needed to support high-impact practices.

For a campus that is part of a state system, decisions related to promotion or resource allocation are likely to be centralized. In such cases, the High-Impact Practices for Administrators Tool can be shared with policymakers at higher levels who have the authority to make decisions that shape the teaching and learning environment—for example, decisions affecting facilities, resources, and scheduling.

Nonetheless, we are convinced that the High-Impact Practices for Administrators Tool can be used to bring into sharper focus the ways administrators can support high-impact practices. And, as it is often the case that good work done by administrators is not communicated to faculty effectively, the tool also can be used to identify communication gaps and to enhance faculty understanding of existing supports. Balanced attention to the ways both faculty and administrators can work in tandem to support high-impact practices will greatly aid efforts to scale and sustain changes that would otherwise be impossible in the current environment.

Notes

1. For more detailed descriptions of high-impact practices and research on their effectiveness, see Ashley Finley and Tia McNair, *Assessing Underserved Students' Engagement in High-Impact Practices* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2013); George D. Kuh and Ken O'Donnell, *Ensuring Quality and Taking High-Impact Practices to Scale* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2013); Jayne E. Brownell and Lynn E. Swaner, *Five High-Impact Practices: Research on Learning Outcomes, Completion, and Quality* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2010); George D. Kuh, *High-Impact*

Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2008).

2. See, for example, the Association of American Colleges and Universities' LEAP Campus Toolkit, which includes an interactive library of research narratives, examples of campus work, and assessment instruments related to high-impact practices (<http://leap.aacu.org/toolkit/high-impact-practices>).

3. Paper in preparation; to learn more about our work with the CSU STEM Collaboratives project, see <http://www.uscrossier.org/pullias/research/projects/csu-stem-collab/>.

4. See, for example, the expanded version of the 2013–14 Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) report on undergraduate teaching faculty, K. Eagan, E. B. Stolzenberg, J. B. Lozano, M. C. Aragon, M. R. Suchard, and S. Hurtado, *Undergraduate Teaching Faculty: The 2013–2014 HERI Faculty Survey* (Los Angeles, CA: HERI, 2014).

5. The “High-Impact Practices (HIPs) for Administrators Tool” is available for free download at <http://www.uscrossier.org/pullias/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/HIPs-for-Admins-Tool-Formatted.pdf>.

6. See K. Roney and S. L. Ulerick, “A Roadmap to Engaging Part-Time Faculty in High-Impact Practices,” *Peer Review* 15, no. 3 (2013): 24.

7. For additional examples, see Adrianna Kezar and Jaime Lester, *Organizing for Collaboration in Higher Education: A Guide for Campus Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors' names on the subject line.

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