

**Evaluating Teaching and Learning at Liberal Arts Colleges:  
New Insights from Institutional Data**

**Proposal for a Mellon 23 Faculty Workshop**

Workshop Leaders

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## **1. Workshop Description**

### *Rationale and Audience*

For over 40 years, academic economists have studied the economics of teaching and learning, usually in the context of elementary or secondary schools. However, the need for data driven measures of pedagogical success extends to college settings. Liberal arts colleges already collect vast quantities of institutional data on students and faculty. These data are, occasionally, used to address questions about the teaching and learning environment at college.<sup>1</sup> Yet, it is fair to say that such data are still a significant, under-utilized resource for researchers and administrators in liberal arts colleges. We propose to convene a conference that will bring together economics faculty at liberal arts colleges, institutional researchers at liberal arts colleges, and other researchers in the field of economics of education to discuss ways to better employ these data. Below are the anticipated themes of the conference, including an example of how these questions might be addressed with institutional data:

- What is “good” teaching, and how can it be measured reliably and validly?  
For example, does the professor a student takes for an introductory class have an impact on her performance in the subsequent class in that sequence, controlling for her baseline characteristics? If so, how does that impact correlate with student evaluation information for that professor?
- How is student learning influenced by a host of other factors, including the pre-college preparation of students; the attributes of students’ peer groups; and the non-academic and extracurricular environments of students?  
For example, many institutions pair roommates by random assignment. Does the type of person one is paired with influence a student’s academic and other outcomes? Are peer effects different for students from advantaged and less advantaged backgrounds?
- Do college policies have their anticipated impacts on teaching and learning? (e.g., policies of remediation for lagging students, or policies that regulate encroaching “grade inflation”).  
For example, does taking a remedial quantitative reasoning class improve performance in subsequent quantitative classes? With information on qualifying exam scores we can determine whether those students who *just* pass the qualifying exam and those students who *just* miss passing perform significantly differently in later courses. Both groups likely have poor quantitative skills, but only the latter group has the benefit of the remedial course.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., David J. Zimmerman, 2003, “Peer Effects in Academic Outcomes: Evidence from a Natural Experiment,” *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 85(1), 9-23; and Patrick J. McEwan and Kristen A. Soderberg, 2006, “Roommate Effects on Grades: Evidence from First-Year Housing Assignments,” *Research in Higher Education*, 47(3), 347-370.

- Brainstorming session: What are the most pressing questions? What types of evaluations can be conducted to answer those questions? What data need to be collected to answer those questions?

### *Schedule and Format*

- In Fall 2008, at Wellesley College, we will hold a one day workshop. Approximately 10-20 participants, the majority from Mellon 23 institutions will attend. The workshop will be divided into approximately 4 panels, the first three panels will include paper presentations and will have a formal discussant. The panels will be organized around themes described above.
- We will try to schedule the workshop for a Saturday after one of the Fall National Bureau of Economic Research workshops that will bring researchers interested in these issues to the Boston area. There are three NBER workshop groups – “Education,” “Children,” and “Labor Economics” – that will include a number of researchers with interests that overlap with the themes of the conference.

### *Workshop Impact*

The immediate impact of the workshop will be the preparation and dissemination of original research on liberal arts colleges that leverages existing sources of institutional data. In the longer term, we anticipate other positive impacts: (1) an edited volume containing workshop related research; (2) improved professional relationships among economics faculty in liberal arts colleges; and (3) the possibility of comparative work across institutions, and of collaborative grant applications to pursue additional research.

## **2. Workshop Organizers and Participants**

### A. Organizers

1. Kristin F. Butcher, Department of Economics, Wellesley College
2. Thomas Dee, Department of Economics, Swarthmore College
3. Patrick McEwan, Department of Economics, Wellesley College
4. Randall Reback, Department of Economics, Barnard College
5. Steven Rivkin, Department of Economics, Amherst College
6. David Zimmerman, Department of Economics, Williams College

### B. Potential Participants at Mellon 23 Institutions

1. David Colander (Middlebury College)
2. Catharine Hill (Vassar College, President)
3. David Johnson (Wellesley College)
4. Phillip Levine (Wellesley College)

5. Jeff Parker (Reed College)
6. Chris Roelke (Vassar College)
7. Akila Weerapana (Wellesley College)
8. Gordon Winston (Williams College)
9. Geoffrey Woglom (Amherst College)
10. Corrine Taylor (Wellesley College, Director of Quantitative Reasoning Program)
11. Larry Baldwin (Wellesley College, Institutional Research)
12. Annick Mansfield (Wellesley College, Institutional Research)
13. Organizers will work to identify additional appropriate institutional research staff at other Mellon 23 institutions

#### C. Potential Participants at Other Institutions

1. Lisa Barrow (Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago)
2. Eric Bettinger (Case Western)
3. Elizabeth Cascio (Dartmouth University)
4. Brian Jacob (University of Michigan)
5. Bridget Terry Long (Harvard University)
6. Phil Oreopoulos (University of Toronto)
7. Cecilia Rouse (Princeton University)
8. Diane Schanzenbach (University of Chicago)

#### **4. Plans for evaluation of the workshop**

We plan to use three mechanisms to evaluate the workshop. First, we will apply an evaluation questionnaire at the workshop's close. Second, we will judge the workshop's success, in the medium term, by whether workshop papers have been published in an edited volume or in peer-reviewed journals. Third, we will judge, in the longer-term, whether the workshop was the impetus for collaborative research or grant-writing.

#### **5. Condensed CVs of Conference Organizers**

Attached.