Learning and Changing

Through Programmatic Self-Study and Peer Review

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with
Heather Woodcock Ayres
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American Association for Higher Education
One Dupont Circle, Suite 360
Washington, DC 20036-1143
(202) 293-6440
www.aahe.org

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FOREWORD

Peter T. Ewell

It is one of the ironies of academic life. In matters of research and scholar-
ship, members of the academy, by custom and routine, turn to peers at
other institutions for guidance and feedback. Yet, in matters of developing
and improving institutional programs and management, faculty members
and administrators often remain isolated on their own campuses, without
the advice and counsel of colleagues from other institutions. Developing
and improving academic and student life programs alongside counterparts
from other institutions, however, can yield a much better product. As my
colleagues who are the authors of this monograph discovered after partici-
pating in a collaboration of this kind, there is inestimable value in working
with educators beyond one's own campus borders.

The leaders of the RUSS Project, as it has become known—for Restructuring
for Urban Student Success—combined grassroots involvement in change
initiatives with a laudable willingness to "park their egos at the door." They
cooperated from start to finish. They sought funding together to improve
campus programs affecting first-year students. It might have been tempting
for the RUSS leaders to seek funding only for solo efforts on their own cam-
puses. But they looked beyond territorial tendencies to create a cost-effective
model of collaboration that was successful in two ways. First, each institu-
tion responded effectively to its own unique needs and circumstances.
Indeed, one of the initial surprises of a project founded on collaboration was
the RUSS Project leaders' discovery of how different their institutions really
were, and that transplanted solutions and cultures wouldn't work. But sec-

ond, and just as important, the three institutions defined new ways of working together that add considerably to what we know about how to undertake effective campus transformations regardless of field.

Over the past decade I have been privileged to watch and participate in a diverse array of change initiatives directed toward improving undergraduate teaching and learning. The topics addressed by these initiatives range from using technology to restructure pedagogy, through collaborative learning and assessment, to accreditation reform and the development of new tools for determining academic quality. The settings have been equally diverse, ranging from efforts directed toward individual classrooms, through comprehensive institution–level change projects, to activities designed to alter the external structures of accountability and incentives that help shape institutional behavior.

From this perspective, I see that one of the most effective aspects of the RUSS collaboration was its heavy emphasis on peer interaction and exchange. This had many dimensions. First, people with comparable roles across institutions could help each other see and address strengths and weaknesses of program design and implementation from common vantage points that colleagues on their own campuses with different jobs didn't share. Having peers to periodically *report to* also was essential. It forced the participants to articulate far more precisely what they were doing and why, to pay more systematic attention to explaining (then dealing with) important elements of their campus contexts that would otherwise have remained implicit or unconscious, and to actually *implement* things between meetings if only to have something to report. These simple–seeming acts were profound. Together, project leaders could feel comfortable asking outside experts for help ("Our institutions all would like to learn more about how to deal with . . .."). And, quite practically, they could pool resources and expertise ("Someone from campus *x* is good at what campus *y* is not so good at. . .") Meanwhile, the ongoing nature of their collaboration ensured that deepening familiarity could enable mutual critique on an increasingly informed, but also trusting, basis.

External constituencies calling for change in higher education often fail to realize that those inside the system are not acting in bad faith and often do care deeply about undergraduate quality. Academics are for the most part responding to a deeply rooted set of incentives that encourage them to do exactly what they are currently doing. Overcoming these incentives—or, more properly, redirecting them to send different messages to faculty and administrators—requires up-front acknowledgment that current structures and incentives act as an interconnected *system* that cannot be changed one piece at a time. This means that successful reform efforts must pay simultaneous attention to both the *external* forces that shape institutional behaviors and to the interconnected network of *internal* structures and processes that govern the ways people do their work.

The RUSS Project leaders made good use of the interconnectedness of the system. Using the vitality of their collaboration, they were able to bring about significant shifts in the way their institutions did business, and the way people inside their institutions thought about the business they did. Their use of what they called "critical friends," for instance, drawn in equal measure from other RUSS Project participants and a carefully-selected group of outsiders who could "bear witness" to the work being done unencumbered by the halo effect of participation, was both clever and effective. This approach, blending partnership and expertise, gave credibility to what the project's leaders were undertaking and at the same time signaled that a new way of working together was, indeed, OK. Their campuses took note.

While sometimes unanticipated, the successful collaborative efforts embodied in the RUSS Project did not just happen, but were a result of careful project *design*. The systems defining their work together have been refined into a package they now call Programmatic Self-Study and Peer Review. It is a valuable tool that Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, Temple, and Portland State can use again and again as they undertake new change initiatives. It is a model that almost every institution can co-opt. And I encourage readers of this monograph to do just that.

INTRODUCTION

RUSS and PSSPR

What happens when faculty and staff from three urban universities work together over a six-year period to improve programs for first-year students? Although we were from different campuses, we were wrestling with similar problems and shared many worries and ideas for solutions. With a goal of improving students' academic experience, we formed the Restructuring for Urban Student Success (RUSS) partnership. We worked together in the same way that scholars do when they collaborate. We pooled our resources of time, talents, and networks in the field; shared data; exchanged visits; gave and received feedback; and reviewed each other's progress. We also coined a term to name this process of collaborative evaluation: programmatic self-study and peer review (PSSPR).

PSSPR is a powerful and enlightening activity that permits even the most seasoned faculty and administrators both to enhance and improve the programs on their campuses and also to further their professional skills and reputations.

PSSPR is of benefit to the larger academic community. PSSPR is an approach suitable for faculty and administrators who are leading collaborative efforts to implement curricular or student life initiatives and need practical information and advice from peers. It is an opportunity for faculty to join partnerships developed by others, and for campus leaders to bridge gaps between faculty members and administrators. Staff members from accrediting agencies, government, and foundations can also benefit from this collaborative approach to program evaluation. PSSPR can effect change.

Through this monograph, we will answer the practical questions about PSSPR and also convey the power and potential of "communities of practice" formed locally and across institutions to investigate common problems and evaluate like work. The communities of practice we formed on our campuses and with our partners are examples of how change can be realized when faculty, administrators, and staff come together around shared goals to achieve specific outcomes. It is our hope that *Learning and Changing Through Programmatic Self-Study and Peer Review* will inspire readers to improve their own programs through similar collaborations.

Jodi Levine Laufgraben, *Temple University*
Heather Woodcock Ayres, *Project Assistant*
Scott Evenbeck, *Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis*
Nancy Hoffman, *Project Convenor*
Barbara Jackson, *Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis*
Judy Patton, *Portland State University*

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Defining Common Needs

In 1995, faculty and administrators from three urban, public universities met at the suggestion of a foundation official familiar with their efforts to improve undergraduate education, particularly for entering college students.[1] The institutions, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), Portland State University, and Temple University, had each identified as a high priority the improvement of teaching, learning, and retention of first-year students who are predominantly "New Majority" (Ehrlich, 1991). The three universities were reforming their undergraduate curricula, developing learning communities, increasing academic support, exploring the relationship between academic affairs and student affairs, and developing credible assessment approaches.

The institutions involved

The institutions developed a collaborative working arrangement, which came to be known as RUSS, Restructuring for Urban Student Success. The project leaders at each institution came to think of their institutions as the RUSS partners. Institutional profiles for Fall 2003 appear in Table 1.

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[1] A fourth institution originally part of the project withdrew during a major transition in leadership.

Table 1: RUSS Project Institutional Profiles for Fall 2003

Student Profile	IUPUI	Portland State University	Temple University
Enrollment	29,860	23,117	33,373
Undergraduate enrollment	21,388	16,906	21,553
First year students	5,754 freshmen	1,536 first-time (3,778 new freshmen)	6,308
Academic units, schools, and colleges	22	5 schools, 3 colleges	18
Percentage of students residing on campus	2%	8% of all students (approximately)	27% of all; 67% of first-year students
Percentage of students working full time	33%	14% (approximately)	32% (First-year students report some to very good chance they will work full time)
Average age of all undergraduates	25	25.6	21 (approximately)
Average age of first year students	23	19.2	18 (approximately)
Description of the minority student population	15% of undergraduates, the majority (10%) are African-American	23% of undergraduates (3.2% African American, 10.1% Asian American, 3.9% Hispanic, 1.2% Native American, 3.8% international, 11.1% other or unknown)	40.2% of undergraduates (21.1% African American, 7.8% Asian American, 7.9% other, 3.2% Latino, .2% Native American)

At the time the RUSS Project began, all three universities were working under internal and external accountability pressures from senior leadership, faculty governing bodies, local communities, and state legislators to improve retention rates, especially of first–year students, and to do so through demonstrably effective programs. IUPUI and Temple were redesigning or

enhancing their first–year experience programs to include learning communities, freshman seminars, and peer mentoring; Portland State was installing a new University Studies curriculum that would begin in the first year and extend through a senior capstone experience.

IUPUI

As IUPUI entered the RUSS Project in 1995, improving student learning and retention rates was on the minds of many, from faculty through the system leaders and trustees. IUPUI was putting into action a new, comprehensive strategy, developed by the institution's chancellor and other leaders, for improving undergraduate education. As a first step in this strategy, IUPUI was developing two new forms of support for entering students: a) the establishment of University College as the home for entering students and b) pilots of both supplemental instruction and learning communities through a first–year seminar. Other changes were underway. The IUPUI faculty, moving away from a distributed course model of general education, had just approved "Principles of Undergraduate Learning," which articulated expectations for student learning in each undergraduate degree program. The Faculty Council's approval of University College included a charge to assess all initiatives to support students. At the same time, at the university's system level through a "strategic directions" initiative, student learning and retention had been identified as the top priority; and the trustees had identified a similar priority to serve students by increasing retention. The RUSS Project fit well into IUPUI's initiatives.

Portland State University

When the RUSS Project began, Portland State was in the early years of implementing University Studies, a new undergraduate curriculum that began in the first year and extended through a senior capstone experience. Faculty and staff were both excited and exhausted by the effort of beginning a new kind of program at a growing urban institution. Those involved in designing and implementing the program felt a high internal demand for accountability. Was this newly designed program delivering on its promises of a more satisfactory student experience, greater student learning, and higher levels of retention? Portland State faculty and administrators also recognized the need to extend this sense of responsibility to the greater university community. University Studies would soon need data about how students were doing throughout

their programs of study. The program's administrators were about to face the challenges of major transition in the university's leadership as a new president and provost came on board.

Temple University

Since 1990, Temple University had been facing serious recruitment and enrollment challenges. It was predominantly a commuter institution that was failing to attract quality students. Faculty voiced concerns about the readiness of entering students for college, and retention rates were slipping. After revising its general education (Core) program in the late 1980s, Temple implemented learning communities in 1993 to improve teaching and learning in the first year of college, and to create a sense of community on this large urban campus. When Temple entered the RUSS Project, institutional leaders were questioning the quality of teaching and learning. Were teachers in learning communities using effective forms of pedagogy? Were students recognizing the curricular connections between the courses in the new Core curriculum? How satisfied were both commuter and residential students with their first-year experience, particularly in terms of involvement and sense of community? Was there an increase in the number of students completing the first year and enrolling in the second?

What was our common concern?

Each of the RUSS partners needed to increase knowledge about and use of assessment and to find effective methods for collecting information on the attitudes and expectations of entering students. The RUSS Project leaders on each campus also needed to form and expand collaborations within their own institutions and improve relationships between their academic and student affairs units. Under the umbrella of "the first year experience" the RUSS partners came together in a community of practice whose framework was student learning, general education, student services, faculty development, strategic planning, and assessment.

The first step in collaboration, beyond realizing their common vision, was for IUPUI, Portland State, and Temple to agree that joint funding that would allow them to work collaboratively was more valuable, practical, and sustainable than funding for each institution's program separately. How to create a meaningful and fundable collaboration came next.

CHAPTER 2

Programmatic Self-Study and Peer Review (PSSPR)

The RUSS partners agreed that their three institutions' programs for first–year college students would benefit from evaluation and the increased capacity to track the programs' progress. It was also determined that others engaged in like work would be best suited to measure and validate the RUSS partners' progress. Each partner agreed to collect, analyze, and report data to share with one another and with outside reviewers.

The RUSS Project leaders recognized, up front, the inherent tension between formative and summative evaluation. But they also recognized that as program leaders they shared with senior administrators and, because they are public institutions, legislators, a common interest in students. Could they design a process of collecting the types of quantitative data—grades, retention and graduation rates—that external and internal audiences requested as evidence of program success, while also collecting rich, qualitative data that program leadership and faculty teaching in these programs could use to improve the learning environment for students? Could they use the results of summative information to report on progress to internal and external constituents, and, for continuous improvement, feed back into the programs the formative results?

The project leaders quickly determined that they could combine formative and summative evaluation through peer evaluation and self–study and, moreover, could design their work together to help each campus. Specifically, this partnership would be a community of practice engaged in common work.

Additionally, the RUSS partners agreed that:

- participation would be voluntary;
- they would sustain the partnership over time;
- the work would be intentional and reflective;
- they would use assessment and evaluation as means for improvement; and
- they would identify and develop best practices in the areas of student services, curricular reform, and assessment.

With the common goal of improving their programs, the RUSS partners wrote self–studies, exchanged reports, visited each other's campuses, shared data, and gathered feedback from peers and experts. These activities collectively came to be known as "programmatic self–study and peer review."

What is Programmatic Self-study and Peer Review?

The idea behind programmatic self–study and peer review (PSSPR) is not new. Collaborative assessment is often used in cross–institution decision making, program development, and evaluation like accreditation, state system initiatives, and consortium projects.

Nor is PSSPR unique in stressing the importance of best practices or common definitions of issues. The practice of benchmarking, long associated with the "total quality management" model in business and industry, is recognized in higher education as an effective approach to assessment. As defined by Educational Benchmarking Inc. (n.d.), a for–profit research firm that develops benchmarking resources for education, benchmarking is "the use of comprehensive comparative data as a tool for evaluating performance." An important characteristic of benchmarking is that it "evaluates the degree to which an organization is successfully fulfilling its mission from the perspective of key stakeholders" (Educational Benchmarking Inc., n.d.). PSSPR, like most benchmarking studies, allows for meaningful comparisons of performance with selected peer institutions. Those directly involved in the programs to be studied—the stakeholders—shape and participate in the assessment process. As in benchmarking studies, the self–studies and site visits conducted through PSSPR yielded evidence that like programs at peer institutions perform at a higher level, thus motivating faculty and staff to improve and aim for higher standards.

PSSPR is unique, however, in that it combines both the external account-ability aspects of accreditation review and the comparative nature of bench-marking with the more formative properties of a departmental program eval-uation. PSSPR intentionally brings together several elements of program review to increase the probability that staff and faculty members at institu-tions will build upon their own work and contribute to other institutions' improvement.

PSSPR is also unique in that campuses establish the criteria for selecting and partnering with peers, and they design their PSSPR activities based on their needs. In addition, the PSSPR process:
- is based on institutional relationships that are developed over time, are deep, and are sustained after formal activities of the collaborative conclude;
- involves individuals of equivalent rank working on common problems at similar institutions;
- is informed by research and theory, but relies primarily on practice and reflection for purposes of program improvement;
- demands equal attention to the products and process of review;
- examines the intended outcomes as well as the unexpected successes and challenges; and
- produces data that address important accountability questions, but, more important, are fed directly back into the program for purposes of improvement and sustainability.

Culture of trust
PSSPR requires the kind of candid, open relationship that scholars use in col-laboration. The RUSS Project leaders' shared commitment to expanding exist-ing initiatives to support at-risk students outweighed the inevitable sense of vulnerability in the process of revealing and comparing. From the beginning, the RUSS partners appreciated the necessity of being open and honest in self-assessing their programs. This openness paid off. It created the foundation for the partners' ongoing work together.

The PSSPR process allows an institution to focus on issues pertinent to its development and goals. The RUSS partners used PSSPR to gain visibility for

their efforts to improve undergraduate education on their campuses. They increased awareness of and support for their first–year experience efforts by:

- making reform efforts more public;
- dispelling misinformation;
- gaining external validation for the programs;
- bringing new people to the effort; and
- preparing the way for next steps or new initiatives.

PSSPR is different from other kinds of external evaluation in that it is a voluntary process of self-scrutiny with the goal of public accountability. As such, it models the power and persuasiveness of ongoing, open-minded assessment in a community of peers. It is neither externally mandated nor imposed—as are accreditation reviews or university-wide evaluations—nor are the resulting reports intended only for private use. The goal is to give broad access to the process and the results so the wider campus community will become engaged in supporting reform and improvement efforts. In this way, PSSPR is more than simply a variation of program review. Because of the way it involves members of the campus community—students, faculty, and administrators—it is also a process for transforming a campus culture.

Communities of practice in PSSPR

As Lave and Wenger (1991) describe it, being a member of a community of practice implies participation in an activity system about which participants share understanding about what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities.

In the RUSS Project there were two levels of communities of practice. The first to form was the metacommunity of practice comprised of leaders from each of the partner institutions—faculty, staff, and administrators deeply involved in developing and sustaining academic and student life programs. This cross-institutional network was responsible for designing and organizing PSSPR activities at the partners' institutions and for leading their local communities of practice. Then, local communities of practice took shape on each campus to carry out activities designed by the "metacommunity." In this way, faculty members, student advisors, program directors, upper-level academic and stu-