Liberal arts colleges in the United States have a special mission, history, and traditions directed towards the education of our young adults. These values, purposes, and goals include particular attention to learning that goes beyond the exchange of knowledge to include the development of critical thinking, discovery, communication, and the ability to apply this knowledge effectively, publicly, and in meaningful ways. If we are to continue the strengths of these institutions in today’s world, we must be able to speak clearly and effectively to our constituents, our students, our families, and our publics about the importance of a liberal arts education. We must be able to describe and communicate our work to our stakeholders, to those who support higher education as a public good as well as an individual advantage. In addition, we all have a strong desire to engage in an ongoing search for excellence which requires continual self improvement. After all, who among us is ever ready to be complacent?

These fundamental issues map directly onto the goals and values of accreditation. Throughout the history of U.S. accreditation, two purposes have consistently served as its base:

A. Accountability: “Each institution must have the capacity to verify that it is in fact achieving its purposes.” (New England Association of Schools and Colleges [NEASC] standards of accreditation, 2005)

B. Assessment: “One fundamental goal of [accreditation] is to cultivate within an institution a habit of inquisitiveness, both formal and informal, about its effectiveness with a commitment to making meaningful use of the results of that curiosity.” (NEASC standards of accreditation, 2005)

One of the biggest tragedies in higher education is the misunderstanding that assessment and accountability are top-down processes driven by external demands of accrediting agencies with a focus only on outcomes. Considering our own institutions, faculty are very interested in understanding the process of learning and want to be the best educators we can be. In this context, the goal for assessment is to move from thinking of it as an external demand to thinking about it as a means for reflection and inquiry about our work. For example, whenever faculty gather in small or large groups, conversation quickly turns to classes: What works and what does not? How do we answer these questions? How do we gather and use data to create better learners? Just what are the markers of successful student learning that faculty use? How will we know when we see them or when we do not? These kinds of questions allow us to think about assessment in a far richer and more useful way than complaining about writing another accreditation report.

Now that I have “convinced” you of the ease with which a college’s interests and needs can overlap with those of accreditation, I will spend the remainder of my time describing a project that traverses this terrain. I will focus on the process and goals of the project because I think they most clearly articulate the links between our colleges and accreditors and because at this time, our results are premature. After describing this project, I will describe how we developed this
collaborative project because such collaboration does not arise full blown from the head of Zeus.

Assessment of Educational Practices and Student Learning in Liberal Arts Colleges
Several years ago, seven selective liberal arts colleges (Amherst, Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Smith, Trinity (CT), and Wellesley) formed a consortium with our regional accrediting agency, NEASC, whose Commission on Higher Education has been instrumental in creating this consortium, developing our essential research questions and methods, encouraging the project in its implementation, and leading the dissemination of findings.

Goals. There are four key goals to this project: (a) to explore the relationship between student learning and key educational practices; (b) to understand how these relationships are or are not related to student demographic factors; (c) to build on our campuses a culture of inquiry about student learning, faculty pedagogy, and institutional practices that will sustain an ongoing, dynamic, and meaningful approach to assessment; and (d) to provide ways to articulate to ourselves and others the process, outcomes, and values of our liberal arts educational mission and practices.

Project Plan. The consortium is examining key factors in student learning by probing the ways through which students engage the curriculum, experience intellectual and social transitions, find their passion in regard to specific career and citizenship interests, and take on roles and responsibilities of mature learners, scholars, and citizens. The project centers on conducting inquiry at transition points in the undergraduate years because we believe that these are the times when students are most reflective, articulate, and informed about their learning, and most directed in making important decisions about their undergraduate years and beyond. These transition points address when students make decisions regarding their: (a) transition to college, choice of courses and other aspects of their first year, (b) choice of major, (c) study abroad and other off-campus experiences, (d) senior capstone experience, and (e) goals for post-graduation. In addition, earlier pilot studies indicated that to understand the central factors influencing student learning and how students engage with the curriculum also requires knowing about their involvement in campus life and their transition to adulthood. During the 2006-2007 academic year, we are looking at how students make the transition from high school to college and how our institutional practices and curricula affect that transition.

Who Are We Studying? If we are to understand student learning, then we must study our students across their college careers and consider significant demographic characteristics that may impact their learning experience (e.g., gender, racial and ethnic backgrounds). The project follows all students in the class of 2010 through our collective and ongoing Institutional Research (IR) protocols. In addition, a race stratified, random sample of 36 students from each of 6 colleges (for a total of 216 students) has been chosen to participate in a longitudinal panel study extending across their college careers. Co-ed schools have equal male and female representation across all demographic groups (two of the six participating institutions are women’s colleges). By addressing shared questions, this project can yield a common data set able to be analyzed in ways greater than any one of our colleges could achieve singularly. The most dramatic, but not only example, is better understanding about the experiences and outcomes of under-represented ethnic and racial groups.
Methods. For a project with such ambitions across institutions, people, and questions, it is not surprising that our approach must be multi-method and quite flexible. Some methods (e.g., Cooperative Institutional Research Program [CIRP] survey of incoming students) shed light on the questions we are asking but others (e.g., interviews of a longitudinal sample of students, transcript analyses, and reviews of student work) allow us to probe more deeply into processes and outcomes. Let me comment briefly on some of our methodological approaches.

Existing Institutional Data. One of the most powerful, practical outcomes of this project is that each college in the consortium is able to make better use of existing data and resources by aligning the work of our IR offices. Consortia data allow for increased sample sizes of sensitive demographic groups. In addition, as we broaden the circle of faculty and students engaged in the project, the IR staff are building more embedded networks for disseminating their reports, learning about and building campus interest for their work.

Transcript Analysis. Each college agreed to undertake an analysis of 50 transcripts from the class of 2005 with special attention to our students from under-represented racial and ethnic groups. These analyses helped us look individually and collectively for patterns of success that will be further examined in the longitudinal panel study. Furthermore, they revealed differences among schools in the time at which students take their first course in what becomes their major and in what we think may be areas of student–faculty connections (e.g., first year seminars with faculty advisors). Additional measures of student performance will allow us opportunities to combine outcome analyses informed by student observations and demographic characteristics.

Longitudinal Panel Study, Year 1: Transition to College and the First Year Experience. This year, the consortium began a longitudinal panel study of a subset of students from the class of 2010. One of the exciting developments of this aspect of our project occurred when we realized that this methodology allows us to include upper level students as interviewers thereby bringing students into this work as investigator and subject.

The results of the longitudinal panel study and related survey and outcome data will build a more nuanced and systematic topography of the academic challenges and successes, social transitions, and growth of independence that define the students’ first year of college through the choice of a major field of study. From review of our early data, we are now organizing our thinking around three general factors: academic challenges and successes, social transitions, and movement toward adulthood. These results in the hands of the faculty and staff who teach and advise our students will support the kinds of discussions, reflection, and activities that are most likely to advance our students’ learning.

Practical Considerations. Before moving to talk about the equally important goal of building a culture of inquiry, let me mention that this approach requires that a couple of practical issues be resolved early. The first is to establish a Memorandum of Understanding across our institutions regarding the use of information gathered under the auspices of the project. This memorandum should resolve the purposes for which shared data may be used (e.g., for internal planning, but not for admissions publications) and how confidentiality will be preserved. Second, so that data may be shared and analyzed across campuses confidentially, it is important to establish a website
Building a Culture of Inquiry

Through this project we seek not only to yield valid and reliable information to inform pedagogy and enhance student learning, but just as important, we seek to build a *culture of inquiry* that can sustain new ideas and pedagogies informed by meaningful assessment. If we are to create a new culture, a *culture of inquiry*, then we must include all of the players in the college community who are involved in student learning: deans, faculty, IR professionals, and students. Moreover, we must find ways to include these players at times and in ways that are meaningful and useful: to them and to the project.

As an example of this process, I will describe how we created the questions being investigated regarding the transition to college and the students’ first year. First, we asked a group of interested faculty and deans of the consortia schools to meet together to talk about their goals for the overall project and to consolidate these ideas into a coherent plan meaningful to all colleges. Several questions were quickly raised that are of interest across our colleges such as: What makes an academically successful first year, why do students transfer, and how do students narrow their focus and choose a major?

Then the project faculty interviewed groups of students and faculty on each campus about this period in a student’s life. In particular, faculty who are engaged in teaching first-year students were asked what they would like to know about first-year students that would help them in their advising and teaching. In addition to these questions, student groups also reflected on issues related to their choice of college. Although methodologies varied somewhat across campuses, we were pleased with the uniformity of the information obtained, the feasibility of the methodology for each campus, and the usefulness of the results as a means of stimulating discussions about best practices on our campuses and interest in the project. Further, the results must be presented in a way and at a time for faculty and staff to be able to use the information effectively and efficiently in their work with students. To this end, we have used a series of meetings on our campuses and across the consortium to discuss, propose, test, and refine the questions and methodology of the project so that key persons on each campus understand and have input to the consortia protocol. We are also identifying and meeting with existing faculty committees and units on our campuses who work in areas linked to the work of the project so that there is a dynamic loop around what information to gather, what results are obtained, how these results can be used to better understand and shape our work, and what new questions are raised—thus continuing the process.

The Consortium. Over the past two years, academic deans, faculty, institutional research, advancement, and NEASC staff have met routinely to discuss and refine the overall project, to plan each respective part and its link to the whole, to test our methodologies, and to resolve consortia issues such as data sharing and confidentiality. Working on these tasks has provided the kinds of interactions necessary to build and work as a consortium rather than as independent, perhaps competitive, units. We are intentional about taking steps that build a foundation of trust and engagement across our institutions and onto our campuses.
The Accreditors. During the past twenty minutes or so, I have focused on a project that began in earnest just about two years ago with the planning of this project. Yet, that cannot be the beginning of this story. A group of deans, faculty, students, and staff from these seven colleges did not just happen to gather to create such an undertaking.

In sorting out its origins, I go back to the “Breckenridge conference,” a two day gathering of deans and faculty from these colleges who gathered along with Bob Froh and his intern from NEASC to discuss best practices, questions we face, and ways to collaborate to address them. However, as I think about that meeting, it becomes very apparent that that too did not just happen. Who raised those questions? Who began talking to these deans; who planted the idea that such a discussion would be useful? Who encouraged, pushed, pulled, nudged, and nurtured us to take this step? That would be none other than our NEASC professionals—specifically, Bob Froh.

Bob Froh took his expertise, knowledge, and awareness of the national issues and placed them in the midst of a group of local institutions with common interests. Through this approach he strategically built awareness of the role of assessment in advancing student learning and the need for accountability, for our institutions specifically and higher education, collectively. To be sure, he had to do this with deep knowledge of the issues, for we were a critical bunch; with great care and patience, for we would not be moved to action quickly; and with the skill of a saint because it is a message not many wanted to hear.

NEASC, through Bob Froh, has been a leader in all aspects of the project’s planning, and now that we are beginning to have something to say, he is central to establishing networks and vehicles for dissemination of results. Through these years, we all have learned first hand that accreditation has a role and the ability to advance student learning by creating a culture of inquiry that meets the needs and honors the traditions, richness, and values of the liberal arts.