Between the rock and the hard place:
Lessons learned from working between external demands and internal resistance to improve student learning

ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES
COUNCIL on QUALITY ASSURANCE

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Overview of the presentation

- Background on the Center of Inquiry

- Teagle Assessment Scholar Program

- Qualities of good assessment leaders

- Strategies of good assessment leaders

- Importance of support

The Center of Inquiry

- Strengthen liberal arts education for *all* students regardless of their background, their privilege, or the kind of institution they attend

  - Liberal arts education is <u>*any*</u> form of education that promotes broad outcomes such as critical thinking, curiosity, moral reasoning, leadership, political engagement

- Work with faculty, staff, and students at colleges and universities to review, make sense of, and respond to evidence

- Not just assessment, but improvement

- Not-for-profit

Teagle Assessment Scholar Program

Assessment Leaders

What makes an effective assessment leader?

- Teagle Assessment Scholars
  - Have credibility as teachers
  - Know their institution's governance systems
  - Are patient
  - Enjoy retail politics
  - Connected up with administrative leaders, connected down with staff and faculty

What strategies do effective assessment leaders use?

Strategies

- ## Reframe assessment
  - Replace "outsiders are making you do this" framework with an internally driven, inquiry-focused framework

Framing assessment

Assessment needs to be about
more than sharing data

One thing that we can conclude from these is that two commonly used change strategies do not work: developing and testing ''best practice'' curricular materials and then making these materials available to other faculty...and ''top-down'' policy-making meant to influence instructional practices...

On the other hand, several claims can be made about what makes change strategies successful. First, effective change strategies must be aligned with or seek to change the beliefs of the individuals involved. Second, change strategies need to involve long-term interventions, lasting a semester, a year, and longer. Third, colleges and universities are complex systems. Developing a successful change strategy means first understanding the system and then designing a strategy that is compatible with this system.

— Henderson, Beach & Finkelstein (2011)

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Ground assessment in conversations – not spreadsheets or reports

Ground assessment in conversations

- Overcomes "courseocentrism" and creates an atmosphere in which we feel safe openly sharing what goes on in our classrooms with our colleagues

I believe that our experience of teaching in hermetically sealed classrooms makes us – to coin a word – "courseocentric." Courseocentrism – like its ethno-, ego-, and Euro- counterparts – is a kind of tunnel vision in which our little part of the world becomes the whole. We get so used to the restricted confines of our own courses that we became oblivious to the fact – or simply uninterested in it – that students are enrolled in other courses whose teachers at any moment may be undercutting our most cherished beliefs.

– Gerald Graff (2009)

Ground assessment in conversations

- Overcomes "courseocentrism" and creates an atmosphere in which we feel safe openly sharing what goes on in our classrooms with our colleagues

- It is not the work of a solitary colleague who is assigned the task of writing the assessment report

- It is not a report generated by a database

- Uses conversations instead of extensive quantitative or qualitative analyses to make sense of evidence

- Helps overcome "the handoff problem"

But fixating on work hours has meant overlooking other issues, like lack of supervision or the failure to use more reliable computerized records. Worse still, the reforms may have created new, unexpected sources of mistakes. Shorter shifts mean doctors have less continuity with their patients. If one doctor leaves, another must take over. Work-hour reductions lead to more handoffs of patients, and the number of these handoffs is one of the strongest risk factors for error. As a result, many hospitalized patients are at the mercy of a real-life game of telephone, where a message is passed from doctor to doctor — and frequently garbled in the process.

– August 5, 2011, NY Times

Assessment should lead to experiments

Data –

Values of qualitative or quantitative variables, belonging to a set of items

→
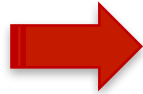
Evidence -

When you and your colleagues have made sense of and come to <u>some</u> agreement about what the data are telling you with regard to some element of student learning or student experience

→

Experiment -

Having moved beyond veto, but prior to consensus, you and your colleagues try something new, see what happens, and talk about what you learned with the community

*The answer is not in the data –
the answer will emerge when you change
something and see what happens*

Assessment

Faculty and
staff development

Improved teaching

Improved learning

*Assessment should energize staff and faculty work by providing information they can use to advance their efforts to help students – **IF NOT, CHANGE IT***

Assessment should connect different data streams

- Data from surveys, rubrics, department and program reviews, focus groups, etc.

- Look at outcomes *and* student experiences

- Involve multiple constituencies in the process - faculty, staff, and students

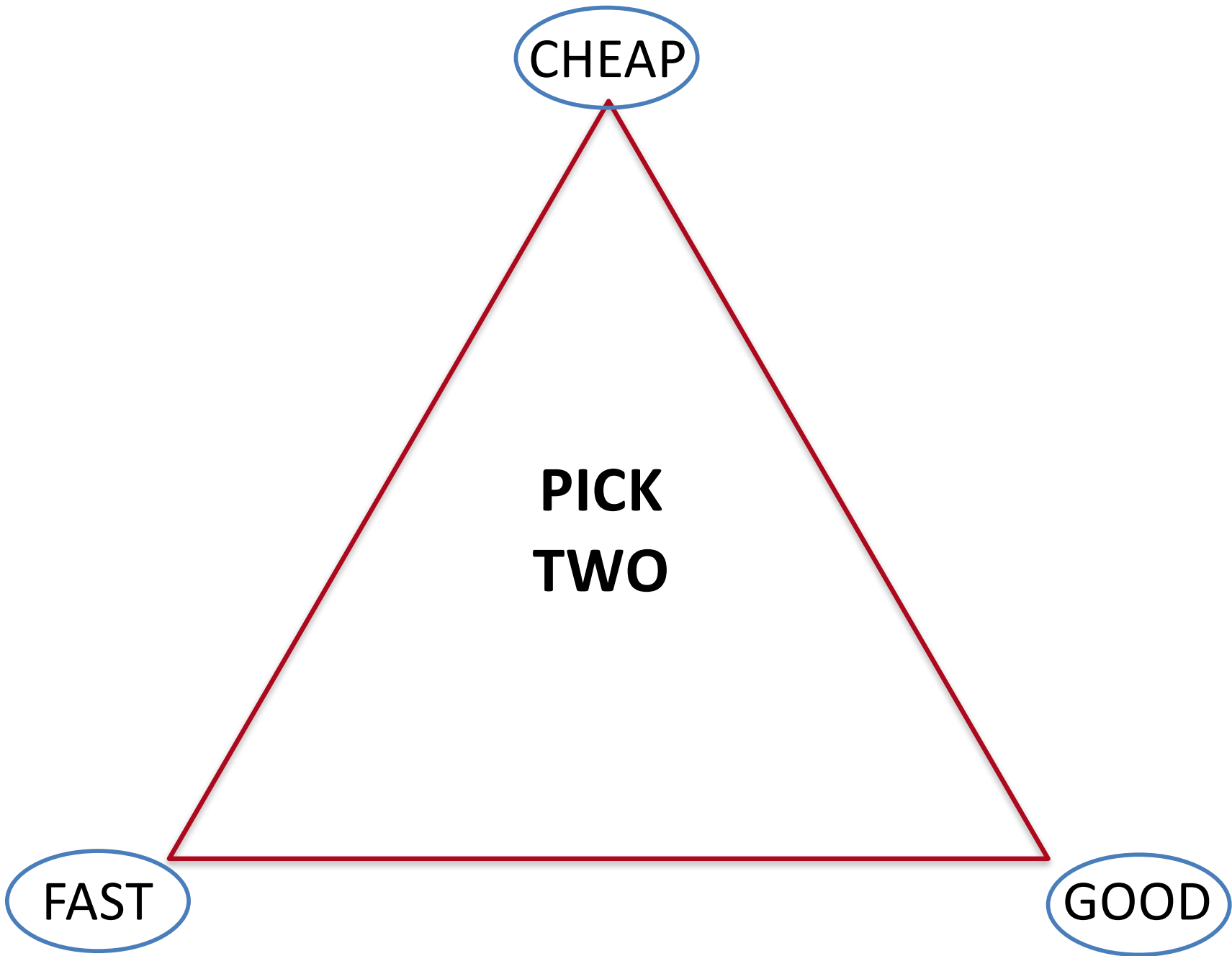- Create a narrative account that connects information from all these sources

Meeting staff and faculty where they are

- Consultative

  - *Assidere* – to sit beside

  - Meet and work with people on their home turf

- Connect staff and faculty ways of knowing from their disciplines and professions to assessment

CHEAP

PICK TWO

FAST

GOOD

Patience

- Good work takes a long time

- Favor a small number of deep, careful projects that lead to experiments over lots of data collection and no action

- Sustainability
  - Structuring assessment so that faculty and staff can fit it into their regular workloads

…neither the fish of faculty, nor the fowl of full-time administrators

More information

- About the Center of Inquiry

  – www.centerofinquiry.org

- About Wabash Study findings

  – www.centerofinquiry.org/study-research/

- About the Teagle Assessment Scholar Program

  – www.centerofinquiry.org/assessment-scholars/

- About the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium

  – www.hedsconsortium.org