

PRESS RELEASE

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CGS Launches Project to Prepare Future Faculty to Assess Undergraduate Learning

Washington, D.C. – The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) has been awarded grants from the Alfred P. Sloan and Teagle Foundations for a new initiative to address the need for greater faculty expertise and engagement in the assessment of undergraduate student learning. CGS will collaborate with five U.S. universities to develop model projects for integrating learning assessment for the improvement of teaching into programs that prepare graduate students for faculty careers.

The project funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation will support work in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and economics, while the grant from the Teagle Foundation will support work in the humanities and qualitative social sciences. In STEM fields, it can be difficult to identify when undergraduate students are most at risk of departing from a baccalaureate degree path. A focus of this project will be providing faculty with tools to identify when students are at risk in introductory, “gateway” courses through effective learning assessment strategies and with models for responding through enhanced teaching. In the humanities and social sciences, one of the main challenges is ensuring that assessment strategies reflect faculty input on forms of knowledge specific to their disciplines. In response to this challenge, the project will foster greater coordination between graduate schools, experts in teaching and learning assessment, and faculty in the disciplines.

“While U.S. graduate education is considered the best in the world, its vital role in preparing faculty with an understanding of learning assessment is often overlooked,” said CGS President Debra W. Stewart. She continued, “In order to improve undergraduate learning, we need to integrate these skills into the training of tomorrow’s faculty.”

“This project offers an opportunity to strengthen faculty engagement in learning assessment by embedding these skills into programs that prepare future faculty. CGS’s strong track record in graduate education reform makes it a natural partner for Teagle in our efforts to improve the quality of higher education by enhancing graduate student preparation for teaching careers,” said Teagle Foundation Vice President Donna Heiland.

“If we want to increase the quality of higher education in STEM disciplines and economics, we need to do a better job of minimizing the obstacles students encounter in the early stages of baccalaureate study. Faculty on the front line are ideally positioned to make science pathways more attractive and science education more effective if they have developed strategies to assess student learning outcomes and to use the data intentionally to improve their teaching; developing such expertise during their graduate training will mean they begin their teaching careers with this important frame in mind,” said Elizabeth S. Boylan, Program Director of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

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During the three-year project, CGS will foster a range of activities at the five participating campuses, and host best practice discussions nationally, to enhance skills and understanding of future faculty in the assessment of student learning and the effective use of student learning outcomes. CGS has supported the development of graduate students aspiring to faculty careers since its involvement in promoting the diffusion of Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) programs (1993-2003), and will also leverage this network of PFF institutions to foster broader adoption of best practices that emerge from the five funded pilot projects.

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The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) is an organization of over 500 institutions of higher education in the United States and Canada engaged in graduate education, research, and the preparation of candidates for advanced degrees. Among U.S. institutions, CGS members award 92% of the doctoral degrees and 77% of the master's degrees. The organization's mission is to improve and advance graduate education, which it accomplishes through advocacy in the federal policy arena, research, and the development and dissemination of best practices.*

** Based on data from the 2010 CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees*