The Top 25 Project: Engaging Students in their Learning
Beverley A. P. Taylor, Jerry Stonewater, Andrea Bakker, and Sara Butler
Center for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching, and University Assessment

Introduction
In his Inaugural address, Miami University’s President Hodge challenged Miami to become an institution unatched in its renown as a learning- and learner-centered university. In keeping with this challenge, President Hodge and Provost Herbst announced a new initiative: The Top 25 Project: Engaging Students in their Learning. This project focuses on our highest-enrollment courses, ones that in many universities end up spending, as President Hodge says, “too much time telling students what we think they need to know, and not enough time using their curiosity to drive their learning.” The TOP 25 Project aims to develop learning models that are inquiry driven, call for active learning, and place the student at the very center of the learning experience. Through redesign of high-enrollment courses that are departmentally owned and operated, the project aims to create systemic change in undergraduate learning at Miami.

Innovative Pedagogy
The Top 25 course redesigns utilize approaches to learning that:
1. are student-centered and use active learning and inquiry-driven approaches;
2. engage students in their learning;
3. improve critical thinking or problem solving skills;
4. result in increased mastery of content and the other important learning outcomes;
5. increase student satisfaction with their learning;
6. reduce the amount of class time spent on low-level memory or descriptive material by incorporating innovative approaches to facilitate student learning this material outside of class;
7. are built on specific student learning outcomes tied to continuous assessment.

Examples of Redesigned Courses
The THE 191 team has implemented inquiry learning using approaches relevant to their discipline. A once-a-week master class is taught by a lead professor. Breakout sessions give students the opportunity to apply lecture material by writing, producing and performing their own 10-minute play. The third component of the class allows students to have direct contact with theatre through a shadowing experience. Students have a variety of shadowing options, including attending a rehearsal, following a stage manager or sitting in on a production meeting. Class time is no longer the first encounter with material, but is devoted to student exploration and application of course concepts. The course is designed to provide the needed support through the lead professor and breakout instructors, while allowing for discovery by creating an original work.

The COM 135 team focused on providing students with better feedback and developing their skills at self-critique. The most important change was the digital recording of speeches that allowed for student review on Blackboard. Students in the redesigned course can readily access their speeches, then self-evaluate using a rubric designed by the department. Faculty provide feedback using speech critique software that speeds the grading process and provides a prebuilt rubric. Because less class time is used in providing feedback on speeches, more class time can be devoted to critical analysis of speeches by public figures. A Blackboard site for faculty allows for sharing of materials and enhances consistency across sections.

Support for the Teams
Each team has received $35,000 in financial support to faculty working on the redesign, travel to conferences on teaching and learning, consultants, computer software, or other materials to support the redesign effort.

Top 25 faculty teams are supported by staff members in the Office of Liberal Education, the Center for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching, and University Assessment, Advanced Learning Technologies, and the Office of Institutional Research. Both CELTUA and ALT include staff members with expertise in instructional design, a variety of active learning pedagogies, and use of technology in teaching and learning. In addition a number of workshops have been offered with nationally recognized consultants on inquiry-based learning.

Preliminary Results
Early results from our surveys show improvements in areas targeted by the Top 25 project. Students in the redesigned courses were more likely to say that they
• engaged in activities designed to elicit critical thinking;
• worked on a project that required them to integrate ideas from multiple sources;
• often asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions;
• had positive relationships with other students in the course;
• worked harder than they thought they would to meet the instructor’s expectations;
• engaged in course activities that helped them “learn to think in new ways”

* These questions were taken from the National Survey of Student Engagement with permission of the authors.

Challenges
We are working to identify the challenges to sustaining the redesigned courses after the funding period ends. These include maintaining the essence of the redesign as faculty teaching the course; training graduate and undergraduate discussion leaders and updating online materials that promote learning of basic course content outside of the classroom. For example, the Marketing students watch video lectures outside of the classroom so that class time can be spent on case studies. In addition we need to work with students to help them value engaged learning over passive learning and to help them improve their skills in working on teams.