shared experience gather to look carefully at artifacts (data) that emerge from their collaborations. The artifacts originate in classes our center supports or programs we administer, and may include reflections written by Bonner Scholars (who have committed to a four-year program of sustained community engagement), student papers drafted in connection with community-based learning experiences, and site evaluation surveys. We organize the data in stations, and participants cycle through each, working alone or in groups to complete a visual or verbal interpretative experiment as they interact with the collected artifacts. The data lab helps us to deepen our understanding of student learning across our programs, and in turn to develop and refine our programs using evidence. Yet its fundamental goal is different: to build a culture of inquiry among our colleagues and allies, in part by opening dialogue about foundational concepts relevant to our work and engaging our entire team in the assessment.

We conclude each data lab by asking two simple questions: What are we learning about [focus of the data lab] from this data? and What else do we wish we knew? The first question unifies our inquiry and prevents us from slipping into a critique of the specific program or initiative that produced that data lab’s artifacts. The second question reveals important gaps in our data collection processes, and, perhaps most importantly, points us toward future directions for inquiry. This question about what’s missing has been particularly fruitful. For example, in a recent data lab, we examined end-of-year surveys in which students reflected on the skills they were learning through civic engagement. Our analysis led us to ask, “How are students utilizing their skills to build the capacity of our nonprofit partners?” We have now modified the Bonner Foundation’s capacity-building survey, completed by Bonner Scholars at the end of the year, in order to capture more nuanced answers to that question.

Assessment “Experts” at Play
Data labs are generative. But they are also playful. In fact, we have learned that creative interaction with the data is critical to a data lab’s success. While it is tempting to simply let participants discuss artifacts in familiar ways, we instead strive to identify distinct themes for data labs and surprising protocols or instructions for each data “station.” Creativity matters, we’ve found, because it freshens people’s relationships with the question, “What are our students learning?” The playfulness that characterizes a data lab moves staff away from sensitivity about the success or shortcomings of their own programs, and toward inquiry about the bigger picture of our work.

In our most recent data lab, for example, which focused on learning about students’ understandings of their own identities and the identities of others, our colleagues entered the room and walked through the magical gates of Wonderland—a carnival that featured four stations: a ferris wheel, bumper cars, a duck shooting gallery, and an opportunity to design your own ride. Each station featured one type of artifact and instructions about how to analyze the artifacts. For instance, at the design-your-own-ride station, data lab participants read the following instructions:

The artifacts are three Presentations of Learning (POLs) videos. [Note: POLs are ten-minute presentations in which senior Bonner Scholars respond to the question, “How has civic engagement affected you?”]

FIGURE 1. A Visual Representation of a Student’s Developmental Journey

A BCCE staff member’s representation of a senior Bonner Scholar’s identity development journey as described in her Presentation of Learning.