
**Categories:** Institutional SoTL; Institutional Reform; Co-Inquiry; Student-Partnerships.

**Summary**

In this article, the authors examine two programs that utilize student-partnerships to engage in the practice of Institutional SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning). Institutional SoTL is an effort to examine teaching and learning on a university/college wide basis, rather than in a particular classroom or pedagogical approach, in order to promote systemic change. In each of the two programs, the Teaching and Learning Academy (TLA) at Western Washington University and the Wabash-Provost Scholars Program (WPS) at North Carolina A&T, students, faculty, staff, and occasionally members of the broader community engage in a process of developing shared research questions. The questions developed by the participants are then investigated and reported on, often with the added impact of informing subsequent institutional wide reforms. The article examines these programs as two case studies of developing student-centered co-inquiry aimed at both improving teaching and learning at their respective universities and helping to bring about meaningful large-scale change.

The first case study examined by the article looks at the TLA program at Western Washington University. TLA brings together participants from the entire university community to engage in a quarterly long dialogue intended to “deepen individual and collective understanding of teaching and learning relationships as part of enhancing the university’s learning environment.” Students can participate on a volunteer basis or as part of a course expectation, and their involvement can range from one quarter to multiple years. Several students also serve as TLA staff “who participate, facilitate, and scribe” as part of work-study positions. At the onset of the program (fall quarter), TLA participants work together to produce a “big question” pertaining to learning. Several factors are key to this process of question generation: the development of questions/the question is a slow, deliberative process of dialogue; in order to ensure that the process is done with equal input from all participants, TLA purposefully flattens the “usual academic hierarchy” by downplaying/ignoring participants’ rank/status; the process is guided by a set of principles intended to ensure thoughtful and respectful discourse. After arriving at a shared upon “big question,” participants focus on researching and answering that question in the winter and spring quarters. The end result of this process varies depending on the nature of the question, but generally speaking the research is conducted in a manner that draws upon the experiences of the participants as well as information drawn from outside sources. Some examples of the end products of the TLA program include the creation of a compendium of reflective teaching practices utilized at the university, a public service program, and the creation of a public garden on campus.

The second case study focused on the WPS program at North Carolina A&T. Once again, a central component of this program was its insistence on shared questions as key to the practice of co-inquiry between students and faculty/staff. While WPS has a more traditional format in that it is structured as part of a credit-bearing, semester-long course, within the classroom students, faculty, and WPS staff interact in co-equal roles. Students make take the course multiple times, and as such there is usually a
beneficial mix of students with varying levels of experience in the program, thus facilitating the role of students as facilitators/mentors. Over the course of the semester, the participants generate questions, conduct research, and delivery their results to the community. Each semester, participants “learn to undertake human subjects research, approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board, and develop focus group and survey questions...They then conduct student focus groups, summarize and analyze the resulting data, create comprehensive data-driven written reports, and present the findings in a public presentation typically attended by students, faculty, staff, and university administrators....” Some of the questions investigated in the program have included examining the factors that promote or hinder student success, the nature of the advising system, campus diversity, and improving graduate education. At the end of each project, participants write reflection journals to help identify what they gained from the experience, what is working/not working, and what potential changes should be made.

Conclusions

According to the authors, both TLA and WPS have experienced what they to believe to be considerable success. At both programs, participants have reported lasting impact on an individual level. In this regard, participants have commented that their respective programs gave them an increased sense of connection to the university, changed their views on the nature of learning, built greater connection to students, faculty, and staff in different programs/departments, strengthened their leaderships skills and ability to work as part of a team, and helped them improve on their communication and research skills.

On an institutional level, both programs have, at the very least, led to the implementation of a system of student-centered learning. More importantly, they have enhanced the educational environment at both Western Washington University and North Carolina A&T by involving students in an on-going process of co-inquiry based institutional research. Finally, both programs have led to meaningful transformations at their respective universities.

Applications

Both the TLA program at Western Washington University and the WPS program at North Carolina A&T seem to offer provocative approaches to conducting institutional research/SoTL that go far beyond traditional methods. By bringing students into the process, and indeed making them central to it, these programs to much more than simply offer fresh approaches to institutional reform. Rather, they simultaneously allow for the employment of several aspects of advanced teaching and learning, and thereby enhancing the nature of teaching and learning at both of these institutions. While a good deal of further research would seem both necessary and warranted, developing a similar program at U.D.C. would offer an opportunity to strengthen student-centered education that would help inform and drive future institutional reform.

Citations of Interest
