

# Considering the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Student Affairs

*Tony Ribera, Sarah Fernandez, and Matt Gray apply a scholarly approach to assessing student learning in the cocurriculum.*

*By Tony Ribera, Sarah Fernandez, and Matt Gray*

**A**S PRACTITIONERS, we are now regularly encouraged to incorporate assessment into our daily practice by asking what Pat Terenzini and M. Lee Upcraft described as the most important questions in student affairs: “Is what we are doing having any effect, is that effect the intended one, and how do we know?” (p. 218). However, we are not always sure *how* to approach these questions, and frankly, we are often a bit afraid of the answers. Despite the fact that assessment sometimes feels uncomfortable and cumbersome, even daunting, it is critical for student affairs educators to see the value of collecting evidence of student learning. So how might we answer these important questions in a time when they have become fundamental to our work? Through three fictional composites, based roughly on actual events, this article examines the defining features of a faculty approach to understanding student learning and their contributions to that learning—namely, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL).

*Terrance is the assistant director of multicultural programming at a private liberal arts college with an undergraduate enrollment of 6,000 students. To promote serious conversations among students about diversity, Terrance has begun planning a campus book club where students will meet monthly to reflect on the selected text and discuss topics like social inequality and privilege.*

*Amber is a community coordinator at a large, public institution with an undergraduate enrollment of 30,000 students. She supervises 21 student staff members in a building that houses approximately 950 first-year students. During August training, Amber presents Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development during one of the sessions. She uses the theory to teach the staff how to create learning outcomes for community and programming development.*

*Josiah is the dean’s assistant for service-learning and community service at a private college with an undergraduate enrollment of 1,500 students. To engage students with their community while providing them with relevant professional experiences, Josiah developed a “professionals-in-service” cocurricular program series, which includes service projects at*

the local food bank, at a nearby urban nature center, and for an after-school tutoring and recess program at the elementary school across from the college.

The scholarship of teaching and learning encourages faculty to take a scholarly approach to their teaching by exploring how students comprehend information in the classroom. The examples of Terrance, Amber, and Josiah allow us to explore the four defining features of the scholarship of teaching and learning as proposed by Mary Huber and Pat Hutchings: (a) questioning; (b) gathering and exploring evidence; (c) trying out and refining new insights; and (d) going public. Using these features as a framework, we can make sense of how student affairs educators might better gather, analyze, interpret, and disseminate evidence of student learning and their contributions to student learning by engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

## QUESTIONING

**IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND** the extent to which students are learning and how they as faculty members contribute to this learning, faculty start by developing specific questions about teaching and learning. Educators in student affairs should have similar questions in reflecting on their work since a core value of student affairs practice is promoting student learning. Practitioners are encouraged to engage in systematic inquiry, beginning with asking questions to understand what students are learning and how that learning can be enhanced.

*Terrance is interested in two things. One, he is curious if by engaging in the program, students gain a better understanding of people from a different race or ethnicity than their own. Second, he wonders if students acquire greater knowledge about topics covered in book club discussions (e.g., privilege). Did students gain a better understanding of diverse perspectives and backgrounds? To what extent did students comprehend the topics discussed in the text?*

*Amber's reason for presenting Chickering's theory is to help staff members recognize their role in promoting student development. Additionally, she wants staff members to be able to draw from theory when designing educational offerings. How do staff members perceive their role in student development? To what extent do staff members use the theory in developing educational programs?*

*Josiah is concerned about whether or not students in the program series will make the necessary connections between community service and professionalism. He also wants to ensure that students gain a meaningful understanding about how to make a lifelong commitment to serving their community. To what extent do students plan on*

*engaging in community service following participation in the program?*

## GATHERING AND EXPLORING EVIDENCE

**QUESTIONS SET THE STAGE** for the scholarship of teaching and learning, but in order for change to occur, faculty members must gather and examine evidence of teaching and learning. At this stage, faculty move beyond posing questions about student learning to engage in a systematic inquiry on teaching and learning. Similarly, student affairs educators are encouraged to assess student learning and to measure their own effectiveness in promoting that learning.

*Terrance requires students who participate in the book club to document their experience using an online blog. Prior to and following each book club meeting, Terrance provides the students with a prompt for their blog entry. These prompts are open-ended questions that encourage reflection on the text and the discussions that occur during book club meetings.*

*For each program facilitated by staff members at Amber's institution, the organizers are required to submit a program proposal including learning outcomes, program description, and methods of assessment. Staff members are also required to submit a program evaluation when the program is completed. In addition, at the end of the quarter Amber asks her staff to complete a survey regarding their level of comfort in developing intentional programs and how they view their role as an educator in the community.*

*At the end of each individual service experience and at the end of the service series, Josiah holds critical reflection discussions with the participants to examine their experiences and connect community involvement and service to their future*

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professional lives. Josiah also encourages students to keep a journal describing their experiences, and for writing down any questions, conversations, ideas, or concerns that came up during the service activities.

## TRYING OUT AND REFINING NEW INSIGHTS

**AT THE THIRD PHASE OF SOTL**, faculty use findings to try out new teaching practices and refine their assessment methods to further explore teaching and learning in the classroom. Similarly, student affairs educators can use analysis of their collected data to refine their efforts. S. Leellen Brigman and Gary Hanson write in a chapter on student affairs research, “Student affairs staff are applied researchers with a common mission of using the information to make things change for the better in our institutions” (p. 49). The capacity to analyze data and apply assessment findings are components of good practice in student affairs.

*Drawing from the blog entries, Terrance realized that students required more support dealing with these difficult topics. Although students were learning from the initiative, they experienced a lot of turmoil over the course of the semester. In planning the book club for the next semester, Terrance collaborated with another student affairs practitioner and faculty member so that students have more support and resources to utilize inside and outside of book club meetings. Terrance plans on requiring students to submit blog entries again.*

*Amber concluded from her data that many staff members do not feel confident in their role as an educator. Staff members feel they understand the theory but do not know how to use it in practice. In planning winter training, Amber adjusted program requirements to encourage more collaboration between new and returning staff members, in order to promote more confidence in applying theory. Amber also modeled different teaching methods throughout winter training and staff meetings for the staff to incorporate in their programs.*

*After reviewing the journals from the first service experience, Josiah realized that the descriptive entries were not pushing the students to think analytically or critically enough about their experiences. Prior to the next reflection session, Josiah developed a list of more challenging questions to promote conversation in hopes that he might spur deeper levels of critical thinking. He also provided journal prompts for the following service activity and utilized Bloom’s Taxonomy to align his questions for the verbal conversation to follow.*

## GOING PUBLIC

**A KEY FEATURE OF THE SCHOLARSHIP** of teaching and learning is that it is disseminated in an effort to advance communal understanding of best practices. This dissemination allows others to learn from and

build on scholarly activity. Similar to faculty who have a professional obligation to disseminate evidence of student learning and effective teaching; student affairs educators should share teaching concepts and disseminate findings from their assessment efforts on teaching and learning to other professionals through writing and institutional, regional, and national presentations.

*Terrance presented at a regional conference about his program and assessment efforts. In addition to presenting his analysis of blog entries, Terrance encouraged students to attend the conference and serve as co-presenters by discussing their experiences with participants. Three students agreed to attend. These students also agreed to serve as peer mentors for the upcoming book club.*

*Amber shared her training sessions with her colleagues, and collaborated with supervisors to incorporate student development theory in their upcoming centralized August training for student staff members. Amber also reflected on the successes and challenges of this type of training and submitted an article to a regional newsletter for housing staff.*

*Josiah’s dean asked him to share his program and his techniques with critical reflection methods and assessing these assignments at the next staff and faculty in-service, in hopes that some of these techniques might be incorporated into both course work and other cocurricular programs. Twenty-two participants attended his session, and more than a dozen agreed to incorporate these methods into their syllabi and cocurricular programs.*

## INSTITUTIONALIZING THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

**THE EXAMPLES OF TERRANCE, AMBER, AND JOSIAH** provide a brief illustration of how the scholarship of teaching and learning connects with professional responsibilities of student affairs educators and what engagement in SoTL might look like in different contexts. In order to promote this engagement, the next step is to institutionalize the scholarship of teaching and learning in the field. Staff development and departmental support, two of the many ways this can be done, are highlighted in the sections that follow.

### Staff Development

**FACULTY DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES** often play an important role in institutionalizing SoTL in the academic disciplines. Despite extensive training in their discipline, faculty may lack preparation in teaching as well as ways to explore the teaching and learning that occurs in their classrooms. Although professionally trained student affairs educators receive formal preparation relevant to teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning, they may still struggle to effectively gather,

analyze, interpret, and disseminate evidence of effective teaching and learning in the out-of-class setting. Institutions should expand their faculty development initiatives and services to incorporate student affairs educators. This will supplement the education student affairs professionals receive in graduate school, will better prepare them for their roles as facilitators of student learning, and will strengthen relationships between academic faculty and educators in the cocurriculum.

### Departmental Support

**FACULTY MEMBERS ARE MORE LIKELY** to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning if incentives exist for this work. Similarly, as we consider a scholarship of teaching and learning in student affairs, it is important to think about what is valued by departments, as evidenced by the behaviors rewarded. How are student affairs educators encouraged to disseminate evidence of teaching and learning? What resources are provided to promote engagement in assessment? When evaluating the work of a practitioner, what role does evidence of teaching and learning play? To institutionalize SoTL in student affairs, upper-level administrators and chief student affairs officers must establish departmental reward structures that support this kind of work.

### CONCLUSION

**WHILE GATHERING, ANALYZING, INTERPRETING, AND DISSEMINATING EVIDENCE**

of teaching and learning is a professional obligation of student affairs educators, these activities are too rare. A lack of staff development and/or departmental support may serve as barriers. Student affairs senior leadership can work collaboratively with faculty development offices and departmental reward structures can be improved to better encourage student affairs engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Doing so could help these educators better fulfill their responsibilities and answer the most important questions in student affairs, “Is what we are doing having an effect, is that effect the intended one, and how do we know?”

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#### NOTES

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