Developing a SoTL Campus Initiative: Reflections on Creating Sustainable Impact

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Abstract:

As more institutions consider developing and supporting a SoTL initiative, much can be learned from universities that have been successful in creating and sustaining their own SoTL programs over time. This article examines the conditions and steps necessary for creating a sustainable SoTL campus initiative. Five distinct phases are described, all of which are essential for sustained success: exploring the idea and shaping the definition; making it count; developing local scholars; branching out and making connections; and sustaining energy and supporting the culture.

Key Words:

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, sustainable impact, local scholars, university teaching.

Introduction

Rockhurst University's SoTL journey mirrors the journey of many universities that were early adopters of the initiative. As new institutions consider supporting SoTL as a valued intellectual contribution or scholarship category, a reflective look at the process provides valuable lessons that can be used to inform institutions that are either considering or are in the early stages of SoTL adoption. Rockhurst University's journey can be seen through the lens of five distinct phases – all of which are essential for sustained success: exploring the idea and shaping the definition; making it count; developing local scholars; branching out and making connections; and sustaining energy and supporting the culture. Rockhurst University began considering an expanded definition of faculty scholarship approximately 15 years ago and moved sequentially through the initial stages, and maintains emphasis on the final three stages.

Phase 1: Exploring the Idea and Shaping the Definition

Over the last decade, institutions of all categories have supported SoTL as a vibrant option for faculty scholarship. At some universities, the support is at the overall university level and applies to the entirety of campus departments. At other universities, support is strong in some disciplines and not in others. It's important to take a careful look at the institution and determine the scope of the initiative and the level of support needed. At a relatively smaller institution such as Rockhurst University, there is only a university-level promotion and tenure committee. In this situation, a SoTL initiative would need to have full support and understanding by a significant majority of the campus community because multiple disciplines and schools would be reviewing faculty applications for tenure and promotion. At larger institutions with school or department-level promotion and tenure decisions, SoTL initiatives can be targeted to schools or departments.

At the earliest stages, the challenge will be to determine a common definition of SoTL that fits the university and the university's culture. To date, there are many definitions of SoTL that are applied in practice, but all have similar elements in that the work should be made public, is open to critique and evaluation, and is in a form that others can build upon. However, these elements are not sufficient for a specific university's definition. Several factors influence the potential SoTL definition, including the university or school's mission, the scholarship or intellectual contribution expectations of accrediting bodies, and the existing definitions of scholarship in university or school level role and responsibility documents.

Rockhurst University's promotion and tenure committee held a reasonably broad definition of scholarship, being open to much of Boyer's model in *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Boyer, 1990) which classified valued scholarship into categories of discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Rockhurst's definition emphasized that all scholarship should be held to the same high standards of peer review, public discussion, and scholarly design.

Rockhurst University's definition of SoTL was developed in 1999 by a Campus Inquiry Group – a group of faculty members who were interested in exploring the SoTL initiative. The Campus Inquiry Group included department and division chairs and experienced and respected faculty members who represented a range of academic disciplines. The group was supported by the Rockhurst University Center for Teaching Excellence, whose director organized meetings, summarized discussions, and communicated with participants. Early in the discussions, it was clear that the primary challenge would be to distinguish between what was eventually to be considered "scholarly teaching" that was valued under teaching and "scholarship of teaching and learning" that was to be valued under scholarship in promotion and tenure decisions.

To help in shaping the SoTL definition that fit the university culture, examples were reviewed from the Carnegie Foundation and other schools who were creating definitions for their institutions. At the time, the Carnegie Foundation's definition of SoTL was, "problem posing about an issue of teaching or learning, study of the problem through methods appropriate to the disciplinary epistemologies, applications of results to practice, communication of results, self-reflection, and peer review". Other definitions

were much more vague, speaking about the investigations of teaching and learning issues that were made public and open for discussion and review. Rockhurst University's final definitions used much of the wording of the Carnegie Foundation, but with a clear distinction between "scholarly teaching" and the scholarship of teaching and learning as shown in the following excerpts from the Campus Inquiry Group writings:

Scholarly Teaching

We think that professional, "scholarly teaching" should be one of the important goals for faculty at Rockhurst University, and that is should be factored into hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions. We recommend this statement about scholarly teaching by Hutchings and Shulman as a useful definition: 'All faculty members have an obligation to teach well, to engage students, and to foster important forms of student learning – not that this is easily done. Such teaching is a good fully sufficient unto itself. When it entails, as well, certain practices of classroom assessment and evidence gathering, when it is informed not only by the latest ideas in the field but by current ideas about teaching in the field, when it invites peer collaboration and review, then that teaching might rightly be called scholarly, or reflective, or informed' (Hutchings & Schulman, 1999, p. 13).

The most important element of this definition was for our faculty members to understand that this was the gold standard of practice for teaching and should be considered in the tenure and promotion decision under the teaching category, and that the scholarship of teaching and learning went beyond the above definition.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

"While the scholarship of teaching and learning incorporates elements of scholarly teaching, it is also different. The difference traces to these basic elements: the scholarship of teaching and learning is public, open to critique and evaluation, and in a form that others can build on. A fourth attribute, implied by the other three, is that the scholarship of teaching and learning involves question-asking, inquiry, and investigation – particularly around issues of student learning" (Hutchings & Schulman, 1999, p. 13). Rockhurst's Carnegie Seminar group would add that an informed, working knowledge of how students learn is a key aspect of such scholarship… someone engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning, we believe, has to follow and understand theories, models, perspectives, and when appropriate, draw on the research methods available to scholars about learning.

Again, it was emphasized that its outputs would be held to the same standards of all other scholarship valued by the promotion and tenure committee.

Phase 2: Making It Count

The single, most important element of creating and sustaining a SoTL campus initiative is the inclusion of the work in promotion and tenure decisions. Without this key step, the initiative will never find a place and be crowded out because of competing demands on faculty time. Each university will need to determine the essential individuals, committees, and groups who need to be included in this step, and to

determine what documents and policies need to be modified to confirm the initiative's official support.

At Rockhurst University, it was essential to obtain the support of the president, the vice president for academic affairs, the promotion and tenure committee, and all academic deans. Because it was a campus-wide initiative, campus level support was essential. The Campus Inquiry Group maintained an open dialog with the chair of the promotion and tenure committee, the vice president for academic affairs, and the deans. All were invited to share their concerns, and any concerns were brought back to the Campus Inquiry Group for inclusion in their discussions and final recommendations. By the time a formal request was drafted, all essential parties were supportive and understood the initiative. In the spring of 2000, a letter was drafted from the Campus Inquiry Group and sent to the constituents named above. The promotion and tenure committee found the statement to be a powerful argument for the support of the scholarship of teaching and learning and accepted the statement to be applied to all future promotion and tenure decisions. The statement included the definitions for scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning, and also included the following paragraph about how the scholarship of teaching and learning fits within the culture of other scholarship at the university:

> "Faculty engaged in research and scholarly activities – 'the work of intellectual life' at Rockhurst University – should have a choice of all the scholarships identified by Ernest Boyer (1990): the scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and teaching. No one form of research and scholarly activity should take precedence over another, and faculty obviously should not have to be involved in all types of scholarship. The seminar faculty members (the Campus Inquiry Group) recommended that research and scholarly activities be broadly defined to allow for the greatest latitude of intellectual involvement. They also recommended that all forms of scholarly activity by faculty meet the same high standards."

Once the initiative is accepted at the appropriate levels, it is important to identify all other documents that may need to be modified for consistency. At Rockhurst University, all colleges have roles and responsibilities documents that provide examples of acceptable disciplinary scholarship. Over time, each document was modified to include scholarship of teaching and learning examples and/or a sample of acceptable journal and conference outlets.

Phase 3: Developing Local Scholars

While articulating a clear definition that matches a university's culture and including the work in promotion and tenure decisions is essential and necessary for success of a SoTL initiative, it is not sufficient. SoTL scholars must be developed and nurtured for the initiative to succeed and sustain itself long enough to become part of the university culture and norms.
Because almost all academic professors are trained to perform only discipline-based research in their doctoral programs, intentional programs must be developed to help faculty members understand how to perform SoTL research and scholarship.

A successful approach at Rockhurst University was the creation of a SoTL Carnegie Seminar group that supported faculty members as they developed SoTL research projects. The program began in 2000 with 15 faculty members across various disciplines. The group was supported with a reference librarian as a resource, and included dedicated sessions on qualitative research and educational research practices. The seminar began with broad discussions in which faculty members would propose research ideas and receive feedback. Small stipends were offered to further develop projects and included the requirement that participants make formal research presentations to the group. This element was essential to move projects along and further helped define the project ideas and narrow the research questions. In the following academic year, 20 faculty members participated in the Carnegie Seminar group with a similar format and structure. This format has been used on and off since its inception, and has been useful for sustaining interest and energy in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Phase 4: Branching Out and Making Connections

For most faculty members, the scholarship of teaching and learning is one of several research interests or threads of research. For some, it is their major focus. Either way, it is not uncommon to find that a faculty member may be the only one, or one of a few in his or her department who is concentrating on this type of scholarship. When this happens, it can be professionally isolating to the faculty member and it is therefore essential that faculty members performing the scholarship of teaching and learning connect with others doing the work. In larger universities, there may be other faculty members trying to answer similar research questions in other disciplines. However, in smaller universities, there may be no other researchers performing similar investigations. In either case, it is important to connect to the broader SoTL community. There is often a disciplinary-level teaching and learning conference where others may be asking similar questions, and there is the interdisciplinary International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL). Both disciplinary organizations and ISSOTL provide the opportunity to learn from others, make connections for further research, discuss projects and challenges, and celebrate successes. At the university level, these connections need to be supported through funding and/or faculty development grants.

Phase 5: Sustaining Energy and Supporting the Culture

When universities have been successful in all of the previous stages or steps, it is still vital to keep supporting the initiative and the scholars doing work in this field. At all universities, faculty members enter the institution with a predisposition to disciplinary research. At Rockhurst University, it's common to see new faculty members perceive SoTL to be focused on classroom 'tips and tricks' or simply describing non-evidence based 'what worked for me' projects. It is only through intentional integration of SoTL definitions and examples into all areas of the culture that the initiative sustained on campus.

For example, at Rockhurst University, the essential definitions and methods of SoTL research is included in the new faculty mentoring program, our first-year faculty

development initiative. Additionally, new faculty members interested in this area are connected with experienced SoTL researchers to help them explore questions and develop projects. Whenever there is turnover in department chairs, deans, and other academic leaders, it is essential to meet with the new appointees to discuss how SoTL fits in the university and to answer any questions or concerns. It is fascinating that even after 12 years of performing SoTL research, there is almost always a group of new and experienced faculty members who meet to bring new scholars into the field and who work to move projects forward. This type of support and conversations rarely happen in disciplinary scholarship, and it is one of the things that make research in this area professionally satisfying and rewarding.

Conclusion

When I take a long hike, I find it important to occasionally stop and look back to celebrate the journey and the milestones reached. The longer the hike, the more important it is to pause and celebrate. Any university initiative and culture change is a long hike, and the development of a SoTL initiative is a long, but important journey. When looking back, we've achieved a definition of SoTL and how it fits at our university, tied the work to the promotion and tenure decisions, and integrated the language into all essential documents. I can look back and see and feel the presence of the colleagues who have walked with me in performing the work, and I can remember the discussions of projects as we met to make our research ready for presentation or publication. I remember the national conferences and the colleagues met and the connections made. As I turn to look forward toward the continued walk, I realize there is no clear final destination or ending summit. There is only the journey. Clearly, this is a positive and satisfying journey that is important to me and to others who value this work.

References

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