

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

### ***Student Engagement, Critical Reflection, Transformative Learning: What's the Key?***

Student engagement is a good thing. We've heard that for decades. Alexander Astin asked the question, "What matters in college?" then answered by saying a big percentage of what matters is student engagement (Astin, 1997). Pike & Kuh (2005, p. 186) agree in a summary statement about this issue, saying, ". . . students learn from what they do in college."

But is what leads to Transformative Learning (TL) merely just being engaged in student activities, being active learners, sitting on the Student Council?

Dr. Vincent Tinto recently answered that question: It's not simply the engagement; it's the meaning students derive from the engagement that matters (Tinto, 2017). A highly regarded researcher, writer, and theorist in this area (e.g., Tinto, 1994; Tinto, 2012), Dr. Tinto's statement about derived meaning from engagement is noteworthy, especially for institutions, faculty, and staff working to operationalize TL.

How do we help students derive meaning? Regarding TL theory, critical reflection is a key aspect of what students must do to understand how the activities they've engaged in — in other words, *what they've done in college* — have made a difference in their lives.

There is a certain spontaneous nature to this process in the absence of intentionally designed critical reflection activities for students. It could be, for instance, that a student does not realize the impact a college activity has had on her until years after her graduation — some triggering event all those years after getting her diploma causes a realization about how she was changed in college.

That's a hit-or-miss proposition, however. Will there *ever* be a triggering event to prompt this realization? What will be the quality and depth of her reflection? Will she document her a-ha moment?

Faculty often know that these hit-or-miss moments *do* happen, though: we get those letters or emails saying, "Dear Dr. \_\_\_\_, You may not remember me, but I took your \_\_\_\_ class in Fall of \_\_\_\_\_. Something you had us do for an assignment really made a difference in my life . . ."

At least in those instances, there *is* a written document, and the faculty member does receive that record of the student's realization that turned out to make a difference in her life.

But as Tinto suggests, if we focus in college simply on providing experiences to students that we believe, or research suggests, will make a difference in their lives, we

have only gone half way toward the successful outcome we seek. We must provide the reflection opportunity; further, we must help students learn *how* to reflect in order to derive meaning from their experience.

After all, post-graduation is not a time we're there to take these actions.

Here at UCO, this is where and how our Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR) initiative as an institutional process serves as the mechanism to ensure students evaluate the impact an activity has, or has not, had on them. The STLR process, whereby students create a learning artifact to be assessed using STLR rubrics, is the place where the reflective opportunity lives. That learning artifact, which can be a written critical reflection on the activity or some other kind of artifact that prompts the same thing (pecha kucha\*, poster, presentation, etc.), is — in Tinto's estimation — the key thing about helping students derive meaning from their engagements in the classroom and out of the classroom during college.

If helping students derive meaning from their engagements on our campus and at other places in which they participate in UCO-directed activity is the key thing in their personal development, then we must plan and execute the ways this will happen. Our approach happens to be via STLR. Other institutions who are adopting/adapting STLR have slightly different ways, but they all involve critical reflection to help students derive meaning.

But "STLRized institutions" are not the only cowboys in this rodeo. Effective institutions have for decades been involved in helping students derive meaning from their experiences. The approaches are many and varied, but it is always the case that intentional design and execution around critical reflection are needed to avoid the hit-or-miss, by-accident approach to whether students come to any transformative realizations about themselves.

No matter the approach taken, though, it is not simply having students engage in a bunch of activities that ultimately leads to transformation. Students must also be provided help and given the opportunity to reflect on the engagements in order to derive the meaning such activity is having in their lives.

What better college education than one that educates students in how to make meaning of their lives?

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*\*pecha-kucha: a presentation utilizing 20 Powerpoint slides during which the presenter has only 20 seconds per slide to speak before the slide advances to the next; total presentation time is thus  $20 \times 20 = 400$  seconds = 6 min, 20 sec*

## References

- Astin, A. (1977). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Pike, G. R., & Kuh, G. D. (2005). A typology of student engagement for American colleges and universities. *Research in Higher Education* (46)2, 185-209. Available: [http://cpr.indiana.edu/uploads/Pike,%20Kuh%20\(2005\)%20A%20Typology%20of%20Student%20Engagement%20for%20American%20Colleges%20and%20Universities.pdf](http://cpr.indiana.edu/uploads/Pike,%20Kuh%20(2005)%20A%20Typology%20of%20Student%20Engagement%20for%20American%20Colleges%20and%20Universities.pdf)
- Tinto, V. (1994). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Tinto, V., Johnstone, S., & Siemens, G. (2017, April 10). Access, Equity, and Completion: Innovations and Challenges on the Road Ahead. Keynote plenary session, *Civitas Learning Summit*. Austin, TX.