



Transformative Learning: Collaborating to Enhance Student Learning

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Background

Since 2004, the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) has been developing a pathway to experiential education. The ultimate goal has been to produce transformative learning experiences akin to “high impact” learning practices identified by Kuh (2008), but with the ancillary benefit that convergence among major divisions of the university, including Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Leadership, is occurring. These divisions, as it turns out, were working in parallel on related concepts and initiatives but were separated by divisional cultures. During the last three years, these divisions have actively engaged with one another to develop common educational tenets for the university to rally around.

Convergence was literal in our case. Representatives (vice presidents) of each university division were invited to retreats organized by the Division of Academic Affairs (AA). Direct input, through active involvement in these retreats, was incorporated into decision-making processes for AA. In addition, a university-level transformative learning committee was formed, with regular participation from different divisions (vice presidents, a dean, faculty, and staff members). An outgrowth of this committee now includes a transformative learning conference in February of each year (now entering its third year). The conference includes explicit participation by the Divisions of Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Leadership, as well as the direct involvement of the vice presidents of those divisions.

Transformative Learning and the Central Six

The product of this collaboration among campus divisions has been the development of the Central Six: areas that UCO wishes to emphasize in its pursuit of transformative learning. Each of the tenets of the Central Six is an answer to the question “Why?” Why include a particular element as a primary student-learning outcome for the institution? In answering the “why” of service learning and civic engagement, for example, Boyer (1987) critiques higher education, noting that American universities emphasize competence over commitment. Boyer notes that many university students arrive at a time in their lives when they are shaping their personal priorities and that institutions are uniquely poised to probe those questions of meaning and morality that shape action. Below, we provide a synopsis of these areas, with examples of how these activities are being deployed at UCO: (1) disciplinary knowledge (which concerns university curriculum per se and is not included in this discussion); (2) leadership; (3) research, creative, and scholarly activity; (4) service learning and civic engagement; (5) global and cultural competencies; and (6) health and wellness.

Leadership

Including leadership as one of the tenets of transformative learning supports the academic mission (Buckner and Williams 1995; Cooper et al. 1994), increases the marketability of our graduates (Bialek and Lloyd 1998), and improves campus life (Janosik and Sina 1988). Leadership development provides skills that employers value: teamwork; the ability to deal with complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity; and confidence



in a professional setting (Bialek and Lloyd 1998). Results from a 2001 study by Cress et al. (2001) indicate that students will show higher gains and more growth in decision making and conflict resolution than peers who did not participate in leadership development. Students also demonstrate greater skills in goal setting, civic responsibility, and growth in self-esteem (Schuh and Laverty 1983); interpersonal communication skills also improve as measured by the Student Leadership Outcomes Inventory (Bialek and Lloyd 1998).

Built upon the 2009 Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education recommendations, students find leadership woven into the fabric of the university through student activities and integrated into curriculum in all five colleges, as well as through specific leadership initiatives. Students can choose to complete an eighteen-hour academic minor in leadership, regardless of their major fields of study, learning from and being mentored by vice presidents and college deans as well as professors recognized for excellence in their fields. Students also can participate in a Read and Lead book discussion group, BASE camp as freshmen, and SUMMIT as juniors. They may be selected for membership in Omicron Delta Kappa, an honorary leadership society.

They may opt to hear from state and national leaders as they share their challenges of leadership in the president's annual Lessons in Leadership course. The faculty and staff at UCO are doing the same through the Educators Leadership Academy, Leadership UCO, Academic Chair Academy, and other venues.

Research, Creative, and Scholarly Activities

Research, creative, and scholarly activities (RCSA) support the mentor-student relationship in the laboratory, field, or a performance hall, and (typically) away from the traditional classroom environment. UCO has produced a systemic response to findings about the benefits afforded by RCSA, including through undergraduate research (Toufic 2000). This includes the development of an Office of Research and Grants (ORG) that provides oversight of on-campus funding opportunities for student-based research and creative and scholarly activities. RCSA grants provided by this office, for example, are initiated by students, ensuring a student-centered approach to scholarship among the faculty members who participate, as distinguished from research that revolves primarily around faculty research objectives (Malachowski 2006).

In general, retention levels for undergraduates are lower in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs than in other university programs. STEM disciplines therefore represent an excellent environment for testing the effect of transformative learning activities on undergraduate retention. An increasing body of literature is now providing testament to the value of such activities in STEM retention (Crowe and Brakke 2008). At least one study also demonstrates that research activities have a positive influence on retention in underrepresented groups enrolled in the sciences (Nagda et al. 1998). Recent analyses of student responses to undergraduate research experiences support this conclusion across disciplines (Seymour et al. 2004).

Service Learning and Civic Engagement

Colby et al. (2003) acknowledge that some may be made uncomfortable with universities that proclaim a set of values—even though institutions constantly promote values, even if unintentionally. Why not stand for values such as altruism and concern for others and appeal to students' sense of higher purpose? The UCO's mission to educate students so that they may become "engaged citizens...serving our global community" is an exhortation to use one's education to repay society's investment in higher education. Service learning coursework, volunteer activities, and experiences and events designed to foster interaction between the university and the metropolitan area it serves are all ways in which service learning and civic engagement (SLCE) are met at UCO.



Two specific programs that foster SLCE are the American Democracy Project and the Volunteer and Service Learning Center. The American Democracy Project (ADP) is a multi-campus initiative sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. UCO's chapter of ADP is instrumental in bringing in guest speakers to lecture and interact with students on various political topics. The Volunteer and Service Learning Center (VSLC) is the primary contact for faculty seeking support and resources for service learning coursework; it provides a directory and database of agencies and others in need of volunteers and matches students to agencies. It also promotes national days of service; all students, as well as faculty and staff, may log their hours in the VSLC database, which provides data on how many thousands of hours the campus community has volunteered in the metropolitan area over the course of a year.

Global and Cultural Competencies

Thomas L. Friedman, in *The World Is Flat* (2005), makes a compelling argument that the process of globalization is leveling the playing field as nations compete for resources and economic dominance. At the same time, Derek Bok (2006), past president of Harvard University, in his book *Our Underachieving Colleges*, tells us how poorly U.S. universities are doing at creating graduates with the global and cultural sophistication necessary to face "the worldwide challenges that lie ahead." According to Bok, students in the United States enjoy the "dubious distinction of being [in] one of the only two countries in which young adults were less informed about world affairs than their fellow citizens from older age groups." In support of its mission, UCO has therefore made a commitment to "increase student learning in the global community by increasing the number of international exchange program participants, increasing the number of international tours, increasing the participation in cross-cultural activities on campus, and establishing academic alliances with international institutions."

To help faculty organize successful tours and to support those students who are willing to study abroad, UCO opened its Centre for Global Competency in 2007, a collaborative venture between the Office of Student Affairs and the Office of Academic Affairs. The creating a study abroad leadership experience (CaSTLE) program trains faculty members to deliver high-quality, safe study tours. The Passport UCO program began in 2004. The mission of this innovative effort is to "inspire unity and understanding in the global community, while providing entertaining and educational events for UCO students and surrounding community." Colleges, departments, and student organizations work together to organize events that allow the community to discover cultures around the globe.

Health and Wellness

Depression, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual assault, eating disorders, and other harmful or self-destructive behaviors are cited as the problems counselors and others must deal with on college campuses today (Cook 2007). Kadison (2004) notes that a variety of factors, including normal developmental issues, pressure to compete and succeed, financial worries, and the loss of one's social support system, lead to students' feelings of hopelessness or to coping with problems in negative ways. It is at this most vulnerable time in students' lives that universities are advised to take a systemic approach to how they define health and how they create an environment of wellness. A broader view of health is one that acknowledges the connection to mental and physical health and learning (Sacher et al. 2005). Creating an environment that increases awareness of physical and mental health issues, that invites students to change behavior, and that supports good health practices are actions cited by O'Donnell (1986) as moving students toward a state of optimal health.

Health and wellness initiatives are now campus-wide and are fully incorporated into several divisions of the university. From new student orientation to student leadership camps and from the core curriculum to



student government legislation, health and wellness are considerations of the daily experience the university offers the student body. Both co-curricular and academic resources are brought to bear in increasing awareness and practice of a healthy lifestyle. Health and wellness initiatives at UCO include the Prevention Oriented Campus, Healthy Campus, Healthy Life Skills, Success Central, and new student orientation. Healthy Life Skills and Success Central are courses that represent required core and optional first-year orientation courses; a textbook entitled *College Talk* (Corwin et al. 2008) is used in the latter course and originated from authors on the UCO campus, who have developed its curriculum.

The Costs and Benefits of Coming Together

Creating a collaborative environment can be painful; it requires the time and commitment of each party to produce new patterns of interaction among units within institutions that may have decades if not centuries of administrative inertia. Time is required to attend new intra-institutional gatherings, and the culture of each unit must adapt to the new vocabularies native to other professional disciplines. However, in our case, the benefits have begun to outweigh these costs by generating new administrative efficiencies (e.g., the Centre for Global Competency) that, by necessity, break down walls of communication between units (Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, in this case). Another benefit has been increased ability to understand the limitations and strengths of each administrative unit, better facilitating intra-institutional collaborations.

The biggest beneficiaries of our collaboration around transformative learning will be students. Transformative learning experiences have clear and tangible effects that are measurable in student satisfaction surveys (e.g., NSSE; Kuh 2008); and undergraduate student retention rates are known to increase through these kinds of activities as well (Tinto 1994). The outcomes for the Central Six have now been defined along with rubrics for assessment purposes. Stay tuned for the long-term impacts of transformative learning practices on student learning at UCO.

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