Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR):
Capturing Beyond-Discipline Learning In and Out of the Classroom

Jeff King, Camille Kilbourne, Mark Walvoord

Abstract

Surveys of employers have increasingly revealed a mismatch between what employers say are the skills they need new employees to possess upon hire and the actual skills possessed by recent graduates (Hart & Assoc., 2013, 2015; Murphy, 2006). The primary dissatisfaction lies with graduates’ beyond-discipline skills such as solving ill-formed problems, working on teams with others whose opinions differ from one’s own, ability to work independently and to a deadline, and others. While postsecondary institutions like to say their graduates receive training in such skills and that college prompts a maturational process that results in students possessing the self-awareness and expanded perspectives necessary to function in ways employers say they must, the process of defining and operationalizing exactly how that will happen is often challenging. One mid-western, master’s comprehensive state university is meeting the challenge via its Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR) process. STLR operationalizes how students engage both in and out of the classroom in activities, assignments, and environments intentionally designed to produce these skills in graduates. STLR also assesses the degree to which such beyond-disciplinary skills are acquired, and the STLR eportfolio serves as the tool employers use to quickly verify graduates possess these skills.

Introduction

Accountability and evidence-based practice are currently called for from many quarters in higher education. Accreditors have become much more active in this area than before, with many pointing to, among other initiating forces, the Spellings Commission Report (2006), which stated bluntly:

We may still have more than our share of the world’s best universities. But a lot of other countries have followed our lead, and they are now educating more of their citizens to more advanced levels than we are. Worse, they are passing us by at a time when education is more important to our collective prosperity than ever. (p. x)

In the ensuing broad-based discussion at legislative levels and within the academy, there seems to have resulted a mandate for the regional accrediting system in the U.S. to demonstrate greater oversight to ensure college graduates are prepared for post-graduate success and do possess the skills and abilities colleges and universities claim they possess. As a result, more attention has been paid to this issue, and that’s a positive step. However, in the vast diversity of institutional types and missions across the country, a consensus of what should be done to improve the situation has been difficult to achieve. Rather, it is at the individual institution level where the most rapid and innovative approaches are being taken.

Alternative kinds of credentialing have begun to appear as different kinds of providers have taken on the challenge of guaranteeing students obtain workforce-ready skills. Badging
initiatives are one example, with Gibson, Oshtastewski, Flintoff, Grant, & Knight (2015) declaring that “digital badges have the potential to become an alternative credentialing system, providing visible recognition in digital symbols that link directly via metadata to validating evidence of educational achievements in public displays” (p. 403).

Whether you interpret such statements to be outright indictments of higher education’s performance in this area or take a more nuanced assessment of the situation, it is clear there is dissatisfaction about how well postsecondary education in the US is performing in many areas, including the critically important area of ensuring graduates possess needed beyond-disciplinary skills.

Anecdotal evidence abounds for instances of beyond-discipline learning: we all have had “a-ha moments” in our own college educations, and as faculty and staff at colleges and universities, we see it when it happens in our classrooms or elsewhere on our campuses. Keeping the prudent dictum in mind that “the plural of anecdote is not data,” such individual cases of beyond-discipline learning do not point to an organized, institutionalized, and assessed process for intentionally facilitating such learning among our students.

We see the light-bulb moments when they occur among our students, resulting in their different understanding of themselves and their place in the world. We delight when this occurs. But more often than not, we posit, these are not instances that were designed into the students’ engagement in their classes and on campus.

We know we do something sometimes that occasionally creates these understandings, but we just don’t plan in the structures, assignments, activities, and environments that are more likely to prompt them than leaving this important aspect of a college education to chance.

And we certainly don’t formally assess how well we do this, tracking how often these experiences happen and at what level among all students across their entire undergraduate careers.

This is what the STLR process does.

Transformative Learning and the Central Six Tenets

The University of Central Oklahoma has had a commitment to Transformative Learning (TL) for many years. TL appears in its mission statement:

The University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) exists to help students learn by providing transformative education experiences to students so that they may become productive, creative, ethical and engaged citizens and leaders serving our global community. UCO contributes to the intellectual, cultural, economic and social advancement of the communities and individuals it serves. (UCO, n.d.)

Transformative Learning was recognized as the conceptual framework within which to position the university’s Central Six Tenets, which themselves were identified as the beyond-discipline skill/ability areas in which graduates should possess competencies to prepare them for post-graduate life, whether in the workforce or in graduate school. As disparate initiatives accumulated over time at UCO — things like the American Democracy Project, the tobacco-free campus initiative, experiential learning, study abroad, formalized undergraduate research programs, service learning, and others — it became clear the university needed a way to organize what was, by 2005-2006, more than a score of such initiatives (Hughes, 2012). The Central Six
Tenets became that organizing structure. The Tenets are:

- Health and Wellness
- Research, Creative, and Scholarly Activity
- Service Learning and Civic Engagement
- Global and Cultural Competency
- Leadership
- Discipline Knowledge

Transformative Learning, then, is expressed within the Central Six Tenets. Note that “Discipline Knowledge” is one of the Tenets, thereby ensuring a place for course and program content among the overall sense of what students are supposed to be able to know and do at graduation if they have experienced a transformative education.

The university by this time already had a strong tradition of undergraduate research, having tracked impressive effects on persistence and retention among students participating in that program. Also in place were strong programs for service learning, first-year experiences (in the form of the university’s Success Central classes taken by a majority of incoming freshmen), study abroad and other diversity experiences (as coordinated through UCO’s Centre for Global Competency and its Office of Diversity and Inclusion), and internships. Given such programs, it was clear that UCO’s existing operations aligned well with George Kuh’s High-Impact Practices (2008). (See Table 1, below.)

Table 1. UCO’s Central Six Tenets and Kuh’s High-Impact Practices

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<tr>
<th>UCO’s Central Six Tenets</th>
<th>Kuh’s High-Impact Practices</th>
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<td>Discipline Knowledge</td>
<td>First-Year Seminars</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Common Intellectual Experiences</td>
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<td>Research, Creative, &amp; Scholarly Activity</td>
<td>Learning Communities Internships</td>
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<td>Service Learning &amp; Civic Engagement</td>
<td>Service Learning</td>
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<td>Global &amp; Cultural Competencies</td>
<td>Capstone Experiences</td>
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<td>Health &amp; Wellness</td>
<td>Writing-Intensive Courses</td>
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<td>Collaborative Assignments &amp; Projects</td>
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<td>Undergraduate Research</td>
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<td>Study Abroad &amp; Other Diversity Experiences</td>
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Due to this alignment, UCO maintains a close connection to Kuh’s focus on High-Impact Practices (HIPs) as part of how it conceptualizes its Central Six Tenets.

UCO’s definition of Transformative Learning is two-pronged, with a focus on beyond-discipline learning as well as a focus on perspective transformation, which owes its conceptual birth to the work of Mezirow (2000). The university’s definition is that Transformative Learning:

- develops beyond-disciplinary skills, and
expands students’ perspectives of their relationships with self, others, community, and environment. (Betz, 2015)

By 2012, then, UCO was poised to design and implement a process that would allow us to intentionally design in the environments and experiences that would produce the transformative learning we believed our students must have to succeed as life-long and life-wide learners whose abilities and perspectives prepare them for employment, citizenship, and family life.

The Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR)

**Brief History of STLR**

Work on UCO’s Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR) began in February 2012 in the form of an application to the US Department of Education for a Title III Strengthening Institutions Program grant. That spring, the main components, processes, and outcomes of STLR were created — all with an eye toward operationalizing the university’s commitment to providing a transformative education to its students in a way that is intentional, scalable, effective, and assessable.

Though the university did not receive the grant in 2012, nor even in 2013 when it reapplied, university administration committed to the plan and structure created and described in the grant narrative. Tangible proof of this commitment is that UCO began implementing STLR with institutional funds, and set for itself a timeline to roll the initiative out in baby-step fashion as it found and built capacity to support STLR.

However, in September 2014, UCO was notified it had been awarded a 5-year Title III grant for STLR in the amount of $7.8M — the entire budget it had proposed in the grant application. This is significant as a validation of STLR’s potential as the grant award included a matching endowment donation from the Department of Education in the amount of $200,000 each year for the express purpose of continuing the student TL projects defined in the grant for a minimum of 20 years after the end of the grant.

Additional validation for STLR came in the form of selection to the 2015 Breakthrough Models Incubator program led by Educause and funded by the Gates Foundation. Proposed for the BMI project was adding a student agency component to the STLR eportfolio, Dr. Melissa Peet’s Integrative Knowledge Portfolio Process (IKPP). This peer-to-peer, longitudinal intervention not only helps students discover tacit knowledge that, when recognized and implemented, can become sources of student resiliency, motivation, and achievement, it also brings an organizing structure to students’ STLR eportfolio presentations of themselves and their possession of beyond-discipline skills and abilities.

Finally, in fall of 2015, UCO was invited to participate in the Lumina-supported Beyond-the-Transcript initiative led by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrator (NASPA) and the American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO). Working as a part of this project, the university will share information about STLR with higher education as part of the group of 12 institutions involved, and will produce a report in December 2016 about STLR operations and impact as of that date.

*How STLR Works*
The STLR process:

- has faculty associating at least one of our Central Tenets to an existing assignment such that it provides a designed-in opportunity prompting for some degree of transformative learning;
- has Student Affairs professionals associating Tenets to SA activities, with card-swiped attendance tracking resulting in automatic, lowest-level TL achievement (“exposure”) gained and captured within STLR (higher levels of achievement require an SA professional to create a TL-assessable artifact that is rated in the same manner as faculty, employing the same STLR rubrics used by faculty);
- gathers the Tenet-related artifacts plus rubrics used to assess them plus the faculty member’s or SA staff member’s rating in the STLR eportfolio;
- displays students’ Tenet achievement as badge levels (Exposure-Integration-Transformation) within each Tenet via a mobile app; and,
- trains students in how to select and present Tenet-related exemplars to prospective employers or graduate schools with IKPP-informed documentation verifying possession of beyond-discipline and perspective-expanding skills, attitudes, and knowledge.

Accomplishing the above means we’ve had to:

- determine how to make formerly isolated systems talk to each other;
- integrate card-swipe student demographic data with Tenet tracking in a way that enables Student Affairs (and other) non-curricular events and activities to be tracked, assessed, and captured within the STLR system;
- devise rubrics to assess Transformative Learning — these rubrics are based on the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U’s) Validated Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics (AAC&U, n.d.);
- integrate a badging system that both displays current Tenet achievement status plus indicates Tenet-associated classes (down to the section level) and SA activities so students can plan schedules and activities for the upcoming term;
- train faculty and staff in how to use STLR rubrics and the system to devise and assess assignments and activities likely to prompt TL experiences; and,
- break down silos and build vibrant, cross-campus collaborations.

Conclusion

With over a hundred faculty already trained, dozens of classes already employing the STLR process and assessments, and thousands of students participating in STLR this semester, we look to replicate and expand the positive results shown in our assessment of the year-long STLR pilot during 2013-2014. In addition, we are working with our STLR Employer Advisory Board to ensure format and efficacy of the STLR/IKPP eportfolio as a key STLR value-add.

References

American Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics


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