SoTL in student affairs graduate preparation programs

Ann M. Gansemer-Topf1  |  Paige Haber-Curran2
Shannon R. Dean-Scott2  |  Brenda L. McKenzie3
Emelia Dunston4  |  Kelly Schrum5  |  Diane Cardenas Elliott6
Alex C. Lange7  |  Paul E. Bylsma8  |  John M. Braxton3

1School of Education, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, USA
2Department of Counseling, Leadership, Adult Education and School Psychology, Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas, USA
3Department of Leadership, Policy, and Organizations, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA
4Department of Medicine, Duke University School of Medicine, Durham, North Carolina, USA
5Higher Education Program, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA
6Department of Counseling & Student Affairs, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, Pennsylvania, USA
7School of Education, Colorado State University-Fort Collins, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA
8Department of Educational Counseling and Leadership, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, Michigan, USA

Correspondence
Ann M. Gansemer-Topf, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011, USA.
Email: anngt@iastate.edu

Abstract
In the previous article, we defined the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and the scholarship of practice (SoP) and identified characteristics and qualities related to these topics. In this article, we provide examples of scholars who have conducted a SoTL project related to student affairs. Each of these entries describes the project and gives us insights into why scholars choose to engage in this work and the impact of their work on teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we highlight several examples of SoTL that were conducted within the context of student affairs graduation preparation program. These examples demonstrate the myriad of ways that student affairs faculty and student affairs scholars of practice can conceptualize and complete SoTL within student affairs. Engaging in scholarly teaching...
requires considerations of the views and expertise of faculty members, decision about content, implementation of pedagogical practice, and assessment. The authors illustrate how they have taken an aspect of their own teaching and created a SoTL project to improve their own teaching and inform teaching and learning for others.

We collected these examples of SoTL research projects through an open call for examples via student affairs listservs and e-newsletters for American College Personnel Association (ACPA), National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) and also through sessions at the ACPA and NASPA annual conferences. In this call, we requested that each proposal contain the following elements: research question and method, findings, and significance. We also asked each author to reflect on how their study can benefit teaching and learning for themselves and others. We received a total of 12 proposals from which we selected the seven included in this article. We first provide an overview of these examples of student affairs-centric SoTL projects. After this overview, we present each of the projects as written by the author(s) of each project.

OVERVIEW OF STUDENT AFFAIRS CENTRIC SOTL RESEARCH PROJECTS

SoTL projects submitted by Paige Haber-Curran and Shannon Dean-Scott and Brenda McKenzie and Emelia Dunston focus on the instructor. Paige Haber-Curran and Shannon Dean-Scott examine how teaching philosophies can influence student learning; thus highlighting that the foundations of effective teaching are related to views and values around teaching and learning. Brenda McKenzie and Emelia Dunston explore the outcomes of a student development theory class co-taught by a faculty and practitioner. Paul Bylsma and Diane Elliott detail pedagogical techniques they have used to enhance learning. Diane Elliott incorporates and evaluates the use of X (formerly Twitter) in online discussions with the goal of increasing student engagement. Paul Bylsma highlights how the seemingly simple act of providing feedback can improve teaching.

Several projects center attention on the improvement of courses to enhance student learning. Kelly Schrum discusses how redesigning a history course can improve learning of content and assist students in seeing the connection between history and current student affairs practice. Beyond understanding content knowledge, the scholarship of Alex Lange and Brenda McKenzie focuses on improving critical skills needed for student affairs work. Alex Lange engages students in activities to enhance their ability to more realistically self-appraise their work. Brenda McKenzie describes how a scaffolded semester long assignment related to a student affairs functional unit can enhance problem solving and innovation.

For each example, the authors provide an overview of the problem and the importance of addressing the problem. They describe their methods, findings, and implications. In essence, each of these pieces, both through the methods used, and their willingness to disseminate their findings publicly, illustrate SoTL scholarship. We know that there are graduate preparation faculty who create phenomenal learning experiences for their students. In fact, readers of this article may review these examples and think, “I do that in my classroom!” We are consistently impressed with the creativity, thoughtfulness, and insights that graduate preparation faculty dedicate to their teaching. Yet, it is not enough to engage in these practices; it is also important to document their effectiveness. The examples in this article demonstrate this connection and we applaud their efforts.

In each of these entries you will also see the author’s insights into their SoTL process. We view this as a SoTL positionality statement. Given the limited discussions of SoTL within
student affairs graduation preparation programs, we were curious as to why our authors engaged in this work and how this work benefited them personally and their teaching. Our intent is that their shared reflections may serve as motivation and encouragement for others to engage in SoTL.

SECTION 1: SoTL PROJECTS FOCUSED ON INSTRUCTOR VALUES AND EXPERTISE

Purposeful pedagogies: Teaching philosophies of high-quality, student-centered educators

Paige Haber-Curran and Shannon R. Dean-Scott

Research question and methods

The focus of this study was on the teaching philosophies of high-quality, student-centered faculty members in student affairs graduate preparation programs. As researchers and educators, we engaged in many conversations together about high quality, learner-centered, and engaged teaching and found we each had an interest to further explore this topic through research, to inform our own teaching and help contribute to the limited research on the topic.

Through an interpretive phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry, we addressed the research question: What are teaching philosophies of quality educators, and how are they enacted? We identified six faculty members who were identified by their peers as quality educators in the fields of student affairs and higher education. They held a range of teaching roles including adjunct, tenure-earning, and tenured at various institutional types across the country. Participants reflected a diversity of backgrounds/identities and included two men, four women, two faculty of color, and three participants who identified as queer. Data were collected through: (a) one-on-one interviews with faculty participants, (b) one-on-one interviews or focus groups with master’s students who were enrolled in courses taught by the faculty member, (c) teaching observation, and (d) course document analysis including syllabi and teaching philosophies. We analyzed the data through phenomenological reduction methods.

Findings

Six key themes emerged from the data reflecting the pedagogical principles that guide quality educators’ approach to teaching and the ways in which these principles were enacted:

(a) Approaching teaching practice with intentionality: Participants were thoughtful in constructing course syllabi; selecting and developing learning activities and assignments; and employing teaching strategies. Faculty had clearly articulated philosophies of teaching that guided their practice.

(b) Supporting students: Participants exhibited care and compassion for students, and they sought to validate students in their identities, experiences, and perspectives. These faculty aimed to make themselves available and approachable to students, and they demonstrated vulnerability as a way to support and connect with students.
(c) Challenging students to grow: Participants set high expectations for students’ engagement and believed significant learning comes from pushing and challenging students and through creating dissonance in the classroom. Participants challenged students in the classroom through course assignments and by providing ample constructive feedback.

(d) Encouraging students to engage with and co-construct the curriculum: Participants believed it was important for students to meaningfully connect with and engage the curriculum. They employed pedagogical approaches that encouraged this engagement and that enabled students to co-construct the curriculum. Post-structural and constructivist approaches were evident in the participants’ teaching philosophies and approaches.

(e) Being adaptable and trying new approaches: Participants adapted and modified their teaching approaches in response to student needs and group dynamics. Faculty tried new and innovative strategies in the classroom when designing course assignments. They also sought out feedback from students and used the feedback to make adjustments.

(f) Engaging in their own self-work: Participants were forthcoming about engaging in their own self-work; they were reflective and saw themselves as learners. By engaging in ongoing self-work, they believed they could better serve and educate students.

Faculty participants approached their teaching with intentionality. Many graduate students interviewed in the study noted their appreciation for the faculty members’ thoughtful and purposeful teaching approaches to course development.

**Significance**

The study adds valuable insight into the how of quality teaching, taking into consideration the perspectives of the faculty members, students, and researcher observers. The findings demonstrate an evidence-based understanding of how quality educators both conceptualize and actualize their pedagogical practice. The six themes can be used as a framework to inform educator development and training. Although the study focused on teaching in a classroom context, the findings can also help inform teaching in co-curricular contexts and in training settings. The findings suggest key strategies for educators to implement that are intrapersonal and introspective (e.g., engaging in self-work and adaptability) as well as those that are applied pedagogical skills/approaches (e.g., challenging and pushing students, providing support, providing opportunities for students to co-construct curriculum). The findings can be used as a framework for designing professional development and training programs for college educators. Further, educators can use the findings from the study to engage in critical self-reflection of their teaching philosophies and practice, asking themselves, for example, if and how they try new and innovative teaching strategies, communicate care and concern for the students, or allow for students to join in co-constructing the classroom experience and curriculum. The six key themes reflect good student affairs practice; in other words, the faculty participants modeled qualities and tenets that are aims of student affairs practice and thus pertinent to graduate programs (e.g., engaging in self-work, intentional practice, challenging, and supporting students).

In our contexts of teaching in a student affairs master’s program and leading trainings and workshops to students (and to faculty and staff), we have personally benefited from the research. The key themes provide a framework for us to engage in our own self-work as educators. We have each spent considerable time individually and together
reflecting on our teaching philosophies and ways in which we can purposefully enact those philosophies with a focus on intentionality, challenge, support, meaningful engagement, and innovation. We have also used the findings in the study to mentor and coach other educators in curricular and co-curricular contexts.

Balancing theory and practice: Impact of co-teaching on master's student learning

Brenda L. McKenzie and Emelia Dunston

Study questions

Graduate students can struggle with seeing the value in understanding student development theory and how it applies to practice. Questions were often raised in class about the “reality” of professionals actually using theory to inform their practice. Students also questioned the usefulness of theories based on students of the past (i.e., Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kohlberg, 1976). To address students’ view that theory was “less” necessary to their work, we assessed what impact a faculty and/practitioner co-taught master’s course could have on changing their perspectives on the value of applying theory to practice.

Overview of methods used to address question

Given previous student attitudes about the usefulness of theory to their work, we believed co-teaching would allow for up-to-date examples and experiences to be shared, thus impacting students’ value appraisal of applying theory to practice. To explore this idea, we, a faculty member (Brenda) and a student affairs practitioner (Emelia), co-taught Theories of Student Affairs whose aim is to educate master’s students on the theoretical foundations that inform their work and develop skills in applying theory-to-practice. Methods used to assess our question included weekly teaching team meetings, in-class discussions and activities, and assignments. We met weekly to debrief the previous class and plan for the coming lesson. These meetings allowed us to critically reflect, individually and collectively, on how well we balanced the theory with practice, and assess which pedagogical approaches were having the most impact on student learning and skill development. Additionally, I (Emelia) held different instructional roles each week, ranging from contributing to discussions to teaching an entire class session, incorporating a practitioner lens to weekly lessons.

Discussion questions and application activities developed during our weekly course planning meetings were utilized to educate students on theories and provide opportunities for them to practice applying concepts to situations (i.e., creating a program using a specific theory as a frame). Hearing students’ responses allowed us to gauge their understanding of a theory and correct misunderstandings and offer additional application examples of said theory to practice.

Students were assigned three case scenarios based on current events and were instructed to identify the key issue(s), address the scenario using a specific theory, and explain the pros and cons of framing the issues within the selected theory. For each scenario assignment, a small group of students were selected to share their responses with the class creating space for open discussion and questions.

In addition to the case scenarios, we developed a semester-long group project designed to highlight the stories less often heard, examine current scholarship, and develop
a program or intervention grounded in theory for a specific population of students (i.e., student veterans, student-athletes). This activity involved identifying a student population, reviewing literature, conducting an institutional review, and development of a final deliverable. Additionally, students were asked to complete an individual evaluation of their project learning experience. These multiple in-class and learning assessment methods offered us insight on students’ understanding of why practitioners integrate theory into practice.

Findings

Students benefited from having a practitioner voice in the classroom, balancing theoretical understanding with application to practice through real-life examples to which students could relate. The utilization of case study scenarios provided us with an in-class opportunity to hear how students made decisions on theory usage and outcomes. We were able to ascertain where their understanding of a specific theory was strong or lacking and offer insight on positive and constructive approaches for incorporating theory into their responses. Other students were also able to probe further into their own understanding of a particular theory. Additionally, students received feedback from us both on their written assignments, allowing for further clarification on theories applied and real-world examples to supplement the students’ response. To accomplish this, we individually reviewed responses and discussed them during our weekly teaching team meetings which allowed us to ensure the accuracy of our feedback on theoretical understanding and appropriateness of practice response. As the semester progressed, we saw improvement in accurate application for many of the students in the course, indicating an increase in their ability to critically identify how theoretical concepts might best be applied to a situation.

Our combined voices aided the students as they worked on a semester-long project blending current scholarship and data gathering into an action-oriented proposal. We individually paired with two project groups and held periodic check-in meetings with each group to assess their progress, understanding of the target population, and how the institution’s current landscape should factor into the intervention proposed. These check-in points were essential given the students’ limited professional experience, which in past iterations contributed to the development of impractical proposals (e.g., excessive expense, lack of institutional context consideration). We found that having a current practitioner as a guide allowed for feedback that led to more realistic final proposals from both a theoretical application and a practicality lens. Student responses to their individual project evaluations provided us with insights on their learning such as how the incorporating of theory into planning helped focus the process, how theory can sometimes block change even when needed, and the value of grounding decisions in theory.

Significance of work

Having the voice of a current student affairs practitioner in the classroom provided a realistic layer of contextual understanding of how to apply theory to practice. Further, class discussions and activities were designed to address the realities of working with today’s college students. This co-teaching approach also allowed us to model a successful, collaborative partnership for the students, an unintended, but valuable benefit. We accomplished this outcome through transparency regarding our approach for course planning, weekly lessons, and shared feedback on assignments. This modeling helped “students to develop an appreciation for collaboration and the nature of negotiation in
collaborative relationships that form part of their professional workplace context” (Lock et al., 2016, p. 25).

**Implications for practice**

Reason and Kimble (2012) noted that “the way student affairs professionals think about connections between formal theory, informal theory, and practice will determine their success as student affairs professionals” (p. 360). Bringing the theoretical perspective together with the practitioner perspective to the classroom allows for deeper master’s student preparation. Ways to accomplish this could include:

- HESA faculty intentionally creating opportunities for co-teaching courses with current practitioners to provide students with an understanding of the intersection of theory and practice.
- Utilizing pedagogical approaches that offer students shared learning opportunities to articulate aspects of a theory and illustrate their application to practice (i.e., case scenarios as described above).
- Alternating roles within the classroom weekly, allowing for the practitioner to teach about a theory and the faculty to share application examples, then switching roles the following class.
- Sharing the grading process, which allows the faculty member to address the theoretical understanding and the practitioner to address the accuracy of application to practice.
- Regular individual and pair teaching team reflection on how the process is unfolding, impact on student learning, and what each (faculty and practitioner) is learning from the experience.

In our example, students were able to see the value of using theory in practice through discussions and activities that pushed them to apply theoretical concepts and hear how we both (Emelia currently and Brenda in her past HESA roles) incorporated the concepts in our work. Having this blend of voices and perspectives prepares students to be more effective in their work, understanding that theory does matter.

We both have reflected on the benefits of this work related to our own teaching and have described them below.

For Brenda: Having the opportunity to hear Emelia’s examples taught me new, more practical approaches to applying theory to current day practice. As a faculty member, it can be easy to feel removed from the reality of what is happening in the day-to-day work of HESA professionals. This collaboration opened new ideas for learning assessments, based on Emelia’s insights that I may not have considered otherwise. Working with a partner also allowed me to “let go” of controlling all aspects of student learning, reminding me of the valuable knowledge current practitioners can bring to classroom learning.

For Emelia: Working with the students in this course allowed me to reflect on my current usage of theory in practice and identify opportunities for additional application. It also pushed me to look critically at my role as a supervisor to entry-level professionals and how I can link these theoretical concepts to their professional work to help with sensemaking. I thought more about the type of experiences they may need for their professional development, the type of coaching/ supervision required for the first 6–12 months on the job, and so forth.

Our example also benefits teaching and learning for others. As higher education experiences many changes and challenges, establishing strong partnerships between HESA faculty members and current professionals is necessary. We should be working
together to prepare the next generation of HESA professionals. Collaborating would allow us to address some of the learning gaps that have been identified by senior level administrators and ensure the curriculum content remains relevant and timely. This type of co-teaching partnership extends the relationship beyond inviting guests to a class session and connecting admitted students with work opportunities (i.e., assistantships, practica) to a place where students begin to understand how their academic learning connects with their practice, today and in the future.

SECTION 2: SoTL PROJECTS FOCUSED ON COURSE CONTENT

“Things are always changing”: Making history relevant for student affairs professionals

Kelly Schrum

Students often dread taking the history of higher education course typically required by Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) graduate programs, anticipating a boring parade of names and dates followed by assessments focused on memorization and regurgitation of facts (Schrum et al., forthcoming). As a historian teaching in a higher education program, I saw this as both a challenge and an opportunity. Could one history course engage student affairs professionals in examining and appreciating the past while making connections to their work today and in the future?

I spearheaded a redesign of the history of higher education course at my institution to focus on access, equity, continuity and change over time, and the contributions of diverse populations and institutions. I integrated primary sources, skills to analyze those sources, and historical thinking. The culminating assessment asked students to create a digital learning activity on the historical roots of a current issue facing higher education today (Loughry et al., 2023). Students then completed classroom activities and learned about a range of issues within a broader historical landscape while creating a sharable resource.

I simultaneously designed a SoTL project to explore the following research questions: (a) To what extent can a history of higher education course designed for students outside the discipline of history teach students historical thinking skills?; (b) In what ways does the analysis of primary sources help students understand the significance of US higher education history?; and (c) How does historical knowledge potentially influence the future practice of participants as higher education professionals?

In collaboration with a colleague at another institution and a doctoral student, we collected data across five sections of the course taught by three instructors at two universities between 2020 and 2021. Seventy-three students completed the courses and 34 participated in the research. Data included student course work, learning activities, and course reflections. Data from interviews with 24 students were collected, coded, and analyzed by the research team using thematic analysis. Research was conducted in accordance with institutional ethics standards at both institutions.

In final course reflections and interviews conducted after the course ended, participating students expressed a new appreciation for the past and its connection to the present. Key findings included relevance to practice, a deeper understanding of the current higher education landscape and student populations, and a commitment to using that information to shape the future. In the interviews, participants reflected on the ways in which they continued to use their knowledge about the past in other classes, conversations with colleagues, and daily professional lives, including justifying funding for new programs, evaluating tuition increases, and contextualizing contemporary debates
over renaming buildings or removing campus statues. Alejandra, for example, commented that although her job “doesn’t call for history in higher education every day,” she found that “having that background and context is very helpful to give me a frame of reference of why we are where we are.”

Participants also valued their enriched understanding of historical context and change over time. Garnet came to appreciate that, “Actually there’s never been a stable period. Things are always changing.” This helped her contextualize immediate disruptions, such as the global COVID pandemic. Students also shared ideas for using their appreciation for change over time to support today’s diverse student populations, drawing on a deeper understanding of the history and legacy of access as well as specific issues such as experiential learning and education abroad programs. Opal, for example, appreciated their new insight into the roots of systemic problems, such as why some students are “struggling to either get into college in general or to persist through graduation.” Finally, participants felt energized to draw on their understanding of the past to create positive change in the future. As Lawson concluded, “my big takeaway was that history is not something that just stays in the past.” Similarly, Ruby felt that historical understanding would provide “a roadmap to help conversations of the future.”

Implications for Practice: Understanding the past and its role in shaping the present and the future supports the work and efficacy of student affairs professionals, helping to situate systemic issues, such as student debt or unequal access to higher education, within a broader historical context (Catalano et al., 2023). This research inspired me to continue revising my history of higher education course, adding additional scaffolding and support for teaching students to grapple with the past and draw explicit connections with their own academic and professional higher education experiences and future work.

This research can inspire student affairs programs to strengthen their focus on the history of higher education, including promoting historical research and assignments that connect the past to the present. Instructional resources, such as sample student projects, guides to using Google Sites, and videos to support creating a digital primary source learning activity, are freely available (https://sites.google.com/view/history-of-higher-ed/home). The project team also developed resources for researching and teaching the history of higher education (https://higheredhistory.gmu.edu), such as primary and secondary sources and a database of more than 700 archives (https://higheredhistory.gmu.edu/archives) with digitized materials about a diverse range of higher education institutions, including 48 Hispanic-serving institutions, 24 HBCUs, 15 women’s colleges, and 63 community colleges. This research also led to the development of a 2024 summer institute, Unpacking the History of Higher Education: A Journey into the Past for Future Leaders (https://unpacking.chss.gmu.edu/), funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The institute will disseminate the findings of this research while expanding the depth and breadth of the Open Educational Resource (OER) designed to promote teaching and learning of history in HESA programs nationwide.

How to improve engagement in online discussions? Simple use twitter

Diane Cardenas Elliott

Research question

Prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in more online courses, this work examined the utility of Twitter as an online discussion forum. More specifically, this
work examined the following research question: Which method, Twitter or discussion boards (DB) was more effective in eliciting student engagement? In July 2023, Twitter was rebranded as X, but the name “Twitter” was retained in this example due to its ongoing recognition.

**Methods**

Participants were graduate students in a Master’s of Higher Education program \( n = 45 \). On a weekly basis, students used both Twitter and DBs in an identical manner to respond to prompts based on readings and engage with peers on a given topic. At semester’s end, students completed a 14-item survey that examined engagement through (a) comprehension of course material, (b) interaction with peers and instructors, and (c) ease of modality use. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Survey items were derived from National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) and were consistent with prior research (Junco et al., 2011). In addition, the survey included four open-ended questions that elicited the strengths and weaknesses of each modality. Data was collected over four semesters in a variety of face-to-face and hybrid courses to ensure utility across the curriculum.

**Findings**

In this examination of engagement, Twitter significantly outperformed on the following engagement metrics: understanding diverse perspectives, connecting ideas to prior courses and knowledge, facilitating peer interaction, and ability to post in a timely fashion. Quantitative results were echoed in the open-ended responses and contextualized how Twitter enacted engagement. The ease of use of Twitter due to mobile device accessibility and the conciseness of Twitter responses encouraged continuous engagement in the discussion. In addition, Twitter alerts signaling that a peer had responded, facilitated tracking of discussions in real time. Two additional unexpected qualitative findings emerged. First, students valued using Twitter as a means for engaging with professional associations and staying abreast of current topics. Second, the art of conciseness, which closely mimics practitioner correspondence, was improved and appreciated by students.

**Significance and implications for practice**

Findings from this work showed Twitter was an effective tool for use in online or hybrid courses and a valuable alternative to DBs. Twitter proved to simulate rich class discussion and keep students engaged in online conversations, making it salient to faculty as programs continue to evolve and engage in more online coursework. Unexpectedly, Twitter was also successful in improving professional readiness. Through Twitter, students practiced distilling ideas to form cogent but brief responses which can improve professional communication skills. Equally important, Twitter was especially effective at introducing students to the online presence of professional organizations, providing an avenue for timely accessing practitioner-related information.

The implications of this work for faculty are multifaceted. From a pedagogical perspective, Twitter facilitated multi-stage discussions, which prior research has shown lead to deeper learning (Baskin, 2001). These results may prompt faculty to consider not only Twitter, but other forms of social media that can be leveraged for pedagogical purposes. In my own SoTL, this work has springboarded a line of scholarly inquiry into...
the evaluation of multiple social media tools for use in face-to-face and hybrid courses. Anecdotally, it elicited high levels of engagement from otherwise quiet students; thus, additional voices and perspectives were added to our important conversations. Finally, these results have been a reminder of the need to constantly appraise the tools I can use to teach effectively. These findings suggest faculty need to keep a finger on the pulse of contemporary communication methods used by students and evaluate their usability for pedagogical purposes.

Assisting students’ development of realistic self-appraisal

Alex C. Lange

Research question

As I began to explore practices of ungrading (Blum, 2020), I wanted to embrace a practice that helped students practice realistic self-appraisal through a guided process where they could exercise their own agency to a particular degree. I also wanted to tie this development of agency to their current and future work contexts. To that end, I sought to answer two questions: (a) How do students develop realistic self-appraisal about their classwork? and (b) How does that translate to their work contexts?

Methods

I have developed a self-assessment assignment in my content courses (e.g., Student Development Theory, Higher Education Finance, Higher Education Policy, Theory and Practice of Change) at the master’s and doctoral levels to help students take better ownership of classroom engagement while encouraging them to practice meaningful self-appraisal with applications beyond the classroom. I developed a rubric that students complete through Qualtrics. I have students assess themselves twice a semester. The midpoint assessment includes 5 Likert-scale items using an agreement scale based on course engagement practices, which I have listed below:

- I come prepared for class each week, including reading and reviewing course texts.
- I make thoughtful contributions that reflect comprehension of the week’s preparation materials through questions or comments in class (aloud in small/large groups or through the chat box).
- I find ways to participate in class through the Zoom chat box, breakout room conversations, and/or large group discussions.
- I answer questions posed by the instructors/fellow students OR I offer helpful explanations when another student is confused.
- I demonstrate an interest in and respect for others’ perspectives and contributions.

In addition to these Likert-scale statements, I ask students to complete a Plus/Delta assessment (https://www.celt.iastate.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/halfsheetPlusdelta-1.pdf). The endpoint assessment uses the Likert-scale engagement items, items about course learning outcomes, and reflective questions on their work, successes, and barriers to that success. At the end of both assessments, students assign themselves a grade for their course engagement. This grade typically accounts for 20% of
students’ overall course grade. I have used this method across multiple semesters with students at both the master’s and doctoral levels.

After students submit their assessments, I review each, providing affirmations on good aspects of self-appraisal and challenging students to better engage themselves in class content, discussion, or on their assignments. Students receive a copy of their assessment after submission to compare the goals they set at the midpoint to their endpoint reflection.

**Findings**

This exercise allows students to practice realistic self-appraisal through a semi-guided process. The assignment helps students self-identify what they are doing well and areas of improvement. Students would often work on areas of improvement between the semester midpoint and endpoint, whether improving reading skills, trying different note-taking techniques, or participating differently during synchronous class sessions. This practice helps learners take ownership of their learning environment and determine ways to improve their performance.

**Significance of the work and implications for practice**

A component of any work environment involves assessing one’s work and effort in a pre-determined period; this often shows up in one’s annual work evaluation. Although some graduate programs help students understand supervision dynamics as a supervisor (Reynolds, 2009), less time goes into students appraising themselves and their work. This appraisal is a foundational competency for personal and ethical foundations (ACPA & NASPA, 2015).

In the assignment description, I make clear to students that I reserve the right to raise or lower the grade they give themselves for their course engagement. If I want to lower the grade—which has only occurred in two or three instances—I offer a conversation with the student to help us discuss our standpoints and gain greater clarity on how we each make sense of the student’s participation. This offer has helped students advocate for themselves, especially if they are more likely to speak up in smaller groups compared to whole group discussions.

Though I do not offer a conversation for those whose grades I raise, I do notice that students marginalized by race, gender, and disability often rate themselves lower compared to their majoritized peers in those identity groups. After midpoint assessments, I give the whole group summaries of what I can improve as an instructor while pushing them to assess themselves to realistic standards rather than unrealistic ones. This process has helped students become better self-directed learners and practice greater realistic self-appraisal in and out of class contexts. Specifically, students have indicated this learning through comments in later semesters of their graduate preparation to me one-on-one, sharing conversations with their supervisors and their reflective process preparing for those talks. In turn, students can better assess their work, which is paramount in a field that prioritizes developmental supervision and improvement strategies for staff and students alike.

**Reflections**

Examining my own teaching practices has helped me practice the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) I often work to instill in students. I have worked to continuously refine my teaching
sporadically; this endeavor has allowed me to examine it systematically. I often report back to students the major themes I found from their midpoint Plus/Delta assessments and discuss how I will incorporate that feedback in the remainder of the semester. In this way, studying my own teaching has also made me more accountable to the students in my courses.

This example may benefit those wishing to help students better understand and exercise their own agency and self-appraisal. Often, new professionals can feel like they lack forms of power in their roles and must constantly negotiate expectations about their work performance (Barr, 1990; Magolda & Carnaghi, 2014). The self-assessment I discussed above helps students better practice their self-appraisal, helping them practice such skills in a guided developmental environment that might not be present in their work contexts. The assignment also welcomes learners into the grading process, which may be useful for instructors wishing to adopt principles of ungrading in their courses (Blum, 2020).

Improving student affairs teaching and practice with frequent student feedback

Paul E. Bylsma

Student evaluations of teaching face a chorus of protests, ranging from gender bias (MacNell et al., 2015; Mitchell & Martin, 2018) and racial bias (Mowatt, 2019; Spooren et al., 2013) to validity concerns (Adams, 1997; Hornstein, 2017). Yet other mechanisms for collecting student feedback on college teaching have also received positive scholarly attention. For example, Hurney et al. (2022) demonstrated how structured mid-course interviews with students can yield productive changes before the course ends. Additionally, opportunities for students to offer formative feedback on their courses might affirm adult learners’ presumed self-directedness and preference to take ownership over their learning (Merriam, 1987). Specifically, Brookfield (2013) noted that power-sharing and mutual decision-making with students is essential to a democratic classroom. I situate my use of student feedback in this positive framework to improve student learning in my classes.

Research question and methods

As a early-career junior faculty member, I lacked the data that would indicate if and how my course design and teaching strategies are conducive to student learning. Therefore, to address this problem I framed a study around the question: Does collecting frequent student feedback to inform course design and facilitate student engagement improve student learning?

To respond to this question, I require first and second-year graduate students taking my classes in a student affairs leadership program at Grand Valley State University (Grand Rapids, MI) to fill out a private journal three times over the semester. The journal prompt asks what content students enjoy or find confusing, what class activities help or hinder students’ learning, and how the course can generally be improved. I organize responses and report the (anonymized, aggregated) results during the next class. A conversation explaining and justifying the suggestions I implemented and declined follows. To date, I have implemented students’ suggestions for changes to course policies (e.g., flexibility with due dates), my own teaching strategies (e.g., utilizing videos in a hybrid/asynchronous courses), and how discussion groups are facilitated (e.g., opting into synchronous video discussions).
Findings

Results indicate that student learning improves when students are given the opportunity to offer suggestions for their courses, and when suggestions are implemented. I draw this conclusion from two different data sources. First, journals from the end of the semester have shown that implementing suggestions from earlier in the semester improved students’ engagement with course material and activities. For example, replacing asynchronous discussion boards with synchronous online conversations improved students’ engagement with course texts. One student wrote, “Having met [synchronously online] twice now, our group has settled into a more comfortable rhythm. This has enhanced my learning, helped me be accountable to complete the weekly readings, and truly engage with said readings. Thanks for being willing to make this change!” Second, course evaluations have explicitly endorsed “[altering] the syllabus to provide a greater understanding for students,” “genuinely [considering] feedback to improve the class for future students and our current experience in it,” and the instructor’s (my) “willingness to be very real about his knowledge, perspectives, [and] areas where he is growing and learning.”

Significance

This work is significant in that a simple instrument operationalizes what has been said in the literature sampled above. Frequent student feedback reveals new possibilities for how my students engage with course materials, myself, and each other. Collecting student feedback multiple times throughout the semester affirms my graduate (adult) students’ self-directedness and autonomy by giving them a voice in the course design and appears to create a more engaged and democratic learning environment. Further, collecting student feedback generates evidence that I can, in partnership with students, co-create a relevant, challenging, and communal learning environment.

Teaching graduate students in student affairs is a form of virtue ethics: we embody what we teach, making our content a lived experience as much as a field of inquiry. Consequently, our teaching ought to model the attitudes and dispositions we want our students to adapt. Frequent feedback models respect for the multiple voices and the value of assessment and evaluation in professional practice.

Benefits of the study to my teaching and learning

This study benefits me in (at least) two ways. First, by sharing power and decision-making responsibility, my students and I are reminded that learning is a communal act. Sharing authority in course design blurs clear distinctions between “teacher” and “learner” in such a community. As instructor, I still maintain ultimate responsibility for course design and student learning. However, sharing power and decision-making responsibility also holds me accountable to the community of which I am a part.

Second, this study draws attention to the embodied and affective elements of course design and how students engage with/in the course. Student feedback about course policy, teaching strategies, and how students engage with each other affirms that graduate education is more than the texts and assessments assigned on the syllabus. Student feedback reveals that students’ experiences with those texts and assessments comprise an important element to their learning. Collecting student feedback illuminates students’
new directions for student services

experiences with/in the class and with each other, thus allowing me to alter course design and my teaching strategies to improve student learning.

Benefits of the study to others’ teaching and learning

Others might benefit from this study not only in the same ways that I have benefited, as articulated above, but also by recognizing students’ preference for autonomous and engaged learning. My students have expressed a desire for increased face-to-face engagement with me and each other, even in online and hybrid courses. This suggests to me that the human element of students’ coursework is important to students and their learning. Additionally, providing feedback on rigid deadlines foregrounds’ graduate (adult) students’ competing demands for their time. Embracing student autonomy in the form of flexible due dates is another step toward affirming students as active participants in the teaching and learning process. Although not intended to be generalizable, this study offers empirical evidence in support of the literature sampled above. Collecting student data mid-course can yield productive changes while the course is still ongoing. Further, giving students the opportunity to share input on their learning experiences affirms students’ self-directedness and ownership over their learning in an engaged and democratic format. Others might also benefit from this study by asking similar research questions in their particular contexts and evaluating for similar results.

Learning assessment in Practice Of Student Affairs higher education master’s course

Brenda L. McKenzie

Study question

Having taught higher education/student affairs (HESA) master’s students for several years, I noticed a lack of depth in students’ ability to clearly identify and innovatively solve a problem facing practice. When given scenarios, they would often fall back on what they had seen or experienced, even when encouraged to be creative. To better understand what I might incorporate into my pedagogy that would address this gap, I explored how a current issue project could aid in HESA master’s students developing sound problem solving and innovation skills.

Methods

Problem solving, innovation, and program planning are necessary competencies for emerging higher education/student affairs professionals. Given the seeming gap in students’ problem solving and innovation skills, students were assigned a semester-long project where they identified an issue impacting the undergraduate student experience in a specific functional area of interest. To assess students’ skill development, the following components were designed, scaffolded, and graded to intentionally build students’ skills in clearly identifying an issue, gathering data to inform an outcome, and creating an
innovative, implementable response designed for use by current practitioners in the students’ identified functional area. Project components included:

- Exploration of a functional area at three different institutions. This exercise required students to research and contact staff to gain insights on institutional context, work responsibilities, and identification of current issues impacting the experiences of students engaged with these offices. I reviewed students’ interview questions to gauge identification of questions that would offer deeper insights on what was impacting the work in this functional area.

- Based on what was learned from the professionals spoken to, students were expected to clearly define a problem/issue impacting the student experience. This expectation required students to identify what was at the core of the issue and develop plans for their next data-gathering steps. Students were also expected to utilize aspects of the integrated model for program development (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2021), as addressed in class. Assessment of their written submission allowed me to identify where students were being too “surface level” or too broad with their problem identification and identify approaches I could incorporate in class to further enhance ability to clearly define a problem.

- Students conducted a literature review to gain an understanding of their issue based on the scholarship. This component focused on building students’ skills in synthesizing information and identifying aspects that could help inform their final deliverable.

- Individual project update check-ins allowed me to assess student learning and skill development, highlight areas they had not considered, and offer guidance toward final deliverables that continued to push students to be innovative problem solvers. I reflected after these meetings about where students were in their learning process and what I might do within weekly class sessions to further enhance this development. These reflections often led to ideas for class discussion, activities, and guests who could share their own experiences, allowing students to learn from those doing the work they aspired to do.

- To allow for innovation and the development of a final product of most use to professionals in their identified functional area, students had the choice of creating one of four possible deliverables: a student learning/engagement proposal for a specific institution that addressed the identified issue (i.e., new program, additional infrastructure, new policy); a podcast series; a set of useful resources, including video; or development of a workshop/training. Prior to students’ final submissions, I met with them individually to engage in conversation about the approach that had the most potential to be of practical use for professionals. This check-in allowed me to assess whether students were choosing an option that met their interests or was informed by their data gathering.

Additional information was provided for each assignment, providing a pathway for students to follow while also allowing flexibility for them to bring in creative thought and response. Rubrics ensured key aspects of learning were incorporated into assignments and also served as a guide for students, keeping them more focused on incorporating their data collection into their decisions rather than personal interest.

Findings

Allowing students to identify a functional area and current issue of interest to them individually provided for a higher level of motivation for and depth of deliverable
development. In the past, students had worked in small groups on a project, often focused on the interest of one student within the group. This decision often led to less commitment from group members and weaker final proposals.

Classroom discussion and activities became a space for me to incorporate aspects that I identified as less developed from the written assignments and individual meetings. For example, to address clear problem identification, one class session focused on problem solving steps through use of a case scenario. To address innovation in program planning, one class session focused on walking through the integrated model for program development (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2021) along with creativity-enhancing activities (i.e., brainstorming uses for a paper clip). Providing opportunities to discuss their project individually with me and collectively in class provided students the opportunity to gain additional insights on how to best address their issue, considering alternative ideas they may not have identified on their own. I observed the class discussions as particularly useful to opening up new avenues of thought for the students related to their projects. I was able to assess students’ creativity when meeting with them individually, which allowed me to ask some challenging questions to push their thinking and planning further. To additionally address competencies that contribute to problem solving and innovation, class sessions addressed budgeting, assessment, student engagement, and creating inclusive environments. Students were expected to incorporate relevant concepts learned throughout the semester into their final deliverable, as appropriate. All final submissions accounted for such concepts that were appropriate to their chosen deliverable focus which I was able to identify during the grading process.

As a side note to the project aim of practical application for current professionals, several students were able to put their projects into action. One student’s resource packet for working with undocumented students was shared with professionals in an EdD program, one submitted a conference proposal related to increasing study abroad opportunities for underrepresented students, and another presented their workshop on career coaching for first-generation students to professionals in their office. All students received suggestions on ways they might further implement the product they developed.

**Significance of work**

Research by Burkard et al. (2005) identified critical thinking and ability to plan and deliver programs as essential skills for new professionals. The components of Aiken-Wisniewski et al.’s (2021) integrated model for program development were incorporated throughout the semester as a way for students to build these identified skills. Classroom activities, such as case studies and topics focused on specific skills further contributed to student learning. Submissions in this semester illustrated more depth in understanding an issue and identifying a solution that was innovative yet realistic. These outcomes differed from previous semesters due to more intentional pedagogical design as well as incorporation of skill-based aspects throughout the semester. Assignments such as this semester-long project provide students with skills in problem identification, data gathering, planning, and initiative development that will inform their future work.

**Implications for practice**

The landscape of higher education is constantly changing, “putting pressure on all parts of higher education to continually meet the needs and demands of students and their
families” (Noël-Elkins, 2017, p 3). Higher education master’s programs have a responsibility to ensure students are graduating with the ability to be innovative, creative problem-solvers. We also have a responsibility to ensure graduates develop the ability to effectively address current needs in practice. Semester-long projects focused on the identification of issues currently perplexing practice intentionally develop student skills in problem identification, data gathering, and realistic response.

Conducting this study benefited me in two ways: (a) Creating a more specific focus throughout the semester on HESA students’ problem solving and innovation skill development highlighted topics for me to address in more depth, both within the specific semester but also for future courses; and (b) Building upon what I had previously noted about lack of depth in problem solving, development of this project allowed me to create class discussions and activities that aided in enhancing these skills.

How does this example benefit teaching/learning for others?

As higher education continues to evolve and face challenges to its core mission, it is important for HESA graduate preparation programs to identify and nurture necessary competencies in our future professionals, particularly as students may be coming to our programs with less developed skills and instincts. Changing political landscapes, unexpected situations, and crisis response require HESA professionals who can think critically, be flexible, and identify new responses to what is occurring. This project benefits others’ teaching and learning by demonstrating one approach for enhancing master’s students’ competency development in innovation and problem solving.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We offer two overarching conclusions that spring from these seven examples. Although the notion of the scholarship of teaching and learning has not been highly discussed within student affairs, there is exemplary work being done in this area. We asked authors of the examples to address two questions: What are the benefits of the study to your own teaching and learning? How does this example benefit teaching/learning for others? From their responses, we conclude that benefits do accrue from doing SoTL work.

In closing, we hope that the examples provided in this article will motivate student affairs faculty members to engage in student affairs-centric SoTL work on a regular basis. We also hope that student affairs faculty members motivated to engage in the scholarly teaching of their courses can make use of some of these examples. To do so will result in a vibrant scholarship of practice associated with the use of research findings from student affairs centric SoTL research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Open access funding provided by the Iowa State University Library.

REFERENCES


How to cite this article: Gansemer-Topf, A. M., Haber-Curran, P., Dean-Scott, S. R., McKenzie, B. L., Dunston, E., Schrum, K., Elliott, D. C., Lange, A. C., Bylsma, P. E., & Braxton, J. M. (2024). SoTL in student affairs graduate preparation programs. *New Directions for Student Services, 1–21.* https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20503
Ann M. Gansemer-Topf
Dr. Gansemer-Topf has served as program coordinator of the Student Affairs Graduate Program and Director of Graduate Education for the School of Education at Iowa State University where she oversees program review and curriculum development. Prior to becoming a faculty member, she accrued 20 years of experience in student affairs and higher education administration. She was selected to serve as the inaugural Faculty Fellow for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at Iowa State University where she has worked with faculty and staff on developing SoTL projects and has several publications related to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. She served as Editor of Teaching and Learning Briefs an online series through CELT at Iowa State. She is serving as Past President for the NASPA Faculty Council. She has been a reviewer for several journals including Journal of College Student Development, Research in Higher Education, and Higher Education.

Paige Haber-Curran, PhD, is professor and program coordinator for the Student Affairs in Higher Education master’s program at Texas State University. Paige is a Fulbright Scholar, and her scholarship focuses on college student leadership development, teaching pedagogy, gender and leadership, and emotional intelligence.

Shannon Dean-Scott, PhD, is associate professor for the Student Affairs in Higher Education program at Texas State University, where she focuses her research on multicultural consciousness, teaching pedagogy, and assessment strategies within higher education. She has taught in the field of student affairs for 10 years and was a practitioner for almost 10 years prior to her faculty role.

Brenda McKenzie is an associate professor of the practice, higher education administration at Vanderbilt University. Prior to becoming faculty, she served 20 years as a student affairs practitioner in various roles. Her research focuses on student leadership education/development, gender and leadership, and leadership identity development.

Emelia Dunston is administrative coordinator at Duke University School of Medicine. She has worked in higher education for more than a decade. Her portfolio of experience includes administrative roles focused on campus activities and programming, student media, and fraternity and sorority life.

Kelly Schrum is a professor in the Higher Education Program at George Mason University and co-editor of Teaching and Learning Inquiry. Schrum’s research focuses on the history of higher education, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and teaching and learning in the digital age, including online learning and scholarly digital storytelling. Schrum has directed more than 60 digital humanities projects with funding from federal and state agencies and foundations.

Diane Cardenas Elliott is an associate professor of student affairs and higher education at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. Her research, which has been documented in
over 50 publications and presentations, focuses on student access, student success, and instructional technology.

Alex C. Lange (they/them) is an assistant professor of higher education at Colorado State University-Fort Collins, where they also coordinate the Higher Education Leadership PhD program. Their research examines the learning and development of minoritized college students, with emerging interests in graduate student learning.

Paul Bylsma is an assistant professor of higher education at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Paul’s research explores teaching, learning, and the nature of knowledge in higher education through the lens of sociomaterial theories and qualitative research methods.

John M. Braxton Dr. Braxton is Professor Emeritus, the Higher Education Leadership and Policy Program of Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. He is an ACPA Senior Scholar Diplomate and a recipient of the Contribution to Knowledge Award bestowed by ACPA in 2016. Professor Braxton served as the Editor of the Journal of College Student Development from 2008 to 2015. He is also a Past President of the Association for the Study of Higher Education.