

The Academy of Fellows for Teaching and Learning, Its Origins and Future Directions. Discuss.

John Bryan, Wayne Hall, and Carl Huether

“So why do we need yet another award for recognizing outstanding teaching here?” That question turned up a lot in autumn 2005 when the process of creating the Academy of Fellows for Teaching & Learning (AFTL) began gathering more momentum.

As the three of us thought about co-authoring this short history of the AFTL, we asked ourselves – and each other – the same question, and others like it. We came to think that our history should be based upon our own reflections fairly directly, and so the narrative flow here will occasionally get interrupted by comments from John Bryan (JB), Wayne Hall (WH), and Bert Huether (BH).

First comes Bert, who more than anyone else we know at UC had urged the creation of such an organization for years, with Wayne and John adding their own comments:

BH: My primary motivation was that the University had an elite group called the Fellows of the Graduate School, based upon strong research credentials, and I felt it was equally fair we have an Academy of Teaching Fellows, based upon strong teaching credentials.

With this same reasoning, the University actually established a University Education Council (UEC) in the mid-1970s, some years after it had established the University Research Council (URC). Both co-existed for a number of years until the UEC succumbed to budgetary shortfalls, while the URC continued. Some years later, President Joe Steger established the University Teaching Professorship, again after several years of having only a University Research Professor.

In this context, then, the AFTL was simply another extension of trying to have the University understand teaching and student learning success as deserving recognition equally alongside success in research.

WH: I agree with Bert’s sense that teaching held a distinctly and explicitly second-class status in relation to research and scholarship. I was aware of various teaching awards already in place, but I also thought that those frequently failed to identify the most effective teachers. We can’t dismiss those awards as mere “popularity contests,” but they also didn’t always reflect the kind of teaching that resulted in deep learning.

I came to think more and more that deep learning should be the outcome of teaching. From a course called “Biology in a Human Context,” which two of my own kids took with Bert at UC, I heard about a University Task Force to Improve Teaching and Learning during the mid-1990s. Bert’s involvement with this Task Force led to forming a team to write an NSF grant that helped in the development of this course. This collaborative team consisted of biology

colleagues at Clermont and Raymond Walters besides his own Arts & Sciences department and colleagues in Education. One main approach for “Biology in a Human Context” was to build upon what students already knew about biologic principles and extend that knowledge in ways that could be relevant to their lives for years to come. So I wondered, why couldn’t more teaching look towards such outcomes? How could we create a broader approach to improving classroom teaching?

JB: In 1995, I became associate dean of the McMicken College of Arts & Sciences, and among the most pressing needs of the college was greater quality and stability in the instruction of undergraduate service courses, especially first-year courses in English and Romance Languages. Those departments relied on a large but ever-changing collection of part-time, non-tenure-track faculty to teach those courses. Their employment was typically below 65% FTE, meaning they were not in the AAUP bargaining unit, had quite low pay, had few or no benefits, enjoyed no job security, and so had little incentive to engage in the lives of their departments or to remain loyal to UC if they got a better offer elsewhere. Those circumstances led to discontinuity of instruction, especially when sudden enrollment shifts necessitated last-minute hires without much opportunity to vet new faculty or to orient them to the needs of the students or the learning objectives of the courses they taught. Among my proudest achievements during that period was to work with the department heads to combine many of these part-time positions into fewer positions (first in the “Field Service” title, later in the “Educator” title) that were in the bargaining unit, benefitted, subject to the UC-AAUP contract salary minima and raises, enjoying more job security and opportunities for promotion and long-term employment. The faculty who populated these new full-time positions tended to be accomplished veteran part-time faculty whose effectiveness in accomplishing student learning was already well established but who had for years had to piece together teaching at two or more colleges to earn a living. The new positions were attractive enough, though, that some were filled by non-local faculty who were looking for teaching-focused positions in a research-university environment.

From 1997 through 2003, I was the dean of the now-defunct University College, a two-year open-admissions college on the main campus. UCollege, as it was known, had been founded in 1960, predating Raymond Walters (now Blue Ash) College and Clermont College. The UCollege faculty, with very few exceptions, saw themselves as having little or no responsibility for traditional disciplinary research, but they did claim the mantle of teaching excellence and took pride in promoting the cause of student learning. Add to that identity an increasing pressure on the faculty of the two-year colleges from a succession of provosts, beginning with Walter Jones in 1996, to produce research in order to achieve promotion and tenure. Without the time or resources to do traditional research, many of those faculty turned to the scholarship of teaching and learning; that is, they began using their own classrooms to develop evidence-based approaches to student learning. (Many UCollege, Raymond Walters, and Clermont faculty were already engaged in SOTL and needed no encouragement from provosts or deans.) In 2003, the Administration dissolved UCollege and transferred its tenure-system faculty to other colleges on the Clifton campus, where the principal duties for most would remain teaching and service.

These two groups of faculty, the full-time non-tenure track teaching faculty and the former UCollege faculty, became acutely aware that while they had job security, their roles within their A&S, Business, Design, Art, Architecture, & Planning, and Education schools did not readily enjoy the same status as tenure-system faculty whose duties included a significant research component. The academic hierarchy at UC (and at every other research university) elevated research well above teaching and learning. Although most departments' RPT criteria gave equal weight to research and teaching effectiveness, the culture of most departments did not. So when the idea of AFTL began to circulate, it found a large cadre of full-time faculty who heartily welcomed it, not only as visible institutional recognition of the importance of what they were doing but also as an opportunity to network and collaborate with other like-minded faculty from across the colleges.

The first fully articulated version of the AFTL took shape in Summer 2005. With some help from John and Wayne, Bert produced a draft describing this new AFTL, called the "Academy of Teaching Fellows" at this stage. This document quickly became the basis for more formal discussions. In September of that same year, for instance, at UC's Convocation, President Nancy Zimpher announced the results of discussions and planning to that point on what was known as UC|21, the academic master plan that was taking shape for the institution. Early phases of the UC|21 planning process thus envisioned the creation of the AFTL, and the "UC|21 Forecast 2006" document described such an academy, one that would help "to ensure students have great and effective teachers." As this same document noted, a "vision of just such an Academy has existed for years at UC and has been promoted within multiple venues and initiatives by those faculty members who care deeply about classroom teaching and student learning."

That fall another version of the AFTL draft proposal was approved by the Advisory Council for the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning (CET&L). This proposal retained a number of goals set forth in the original draft proposal for such an Academy, namely, that the AFTL will:

- honor and reward faculty who have demonstrated excellence in teaching, whether scholarly teaching or the scholarship of teaching and learning ("Scholarly teaching" was defined as "knowing discipline content, reviewing the scholarship of teaching and learning, and utilizing both to maximize student learning.")
- advise the President and provosts on matters related to the university's instructional mission by establishing a formal communication network
- enhance teaching effectiveness and learning by encouraging pedagogic innovation, experimentation, evaluation and assessment, and dialogue about teaching and learning
- foster the scholarship of teaching and learning
- enhance the status of teaching by promoting a sense of community among teachers
- develop and disseminate models of teaching that foster student learning
- conduct seminars, colloquia, and workshops on teaching effectiveness
- serve as a resource to the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning (CET&L)
- serve as mentors to faculty desiring to enhance their teaching effectiveness

Additionally, and again from the original draft, the CET&L Advisory Council's proposal retained the following vision:

Through its activities, the AFTL is expected to significantly influence the present and future directions of higher education at UC, and at the State and national levels. It will recognize faculty who have made significant and extended contributions to excellence in scholarly teaching as well as in the scholarship of teaching and learning. And it will create a culture that promotes pedagogical innovation, experimentation, assessment, and scholarship.

The draft at this point, we feel, fully articulated the kind of model that all three of us most wanted to create and foster, and the question, "why do we need yet another award for teaching," seemed adequately answered. In short, no other framework existed at UC that recognized teaching and that also sought to emphasize and foster student learning within a broad institutional context. More specifically, and as originally envisioned, the draft recognized the essential role of scholarly teaching as well as the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) within that same institutional context.

The process for approving the AFTL as an official University organization followed a thorough and rigorous path. Later in fall 2005, and following approval by the CET&L Advisory Council, the Academic Affairs Committee of Faculty Senate considered and endorsed this same proposal, which was then passed – unanimously – by the full Faculty Senate in February 2006.

In March 2006 the proposal for the AFTL was then considered by the Academic Operations Committee, an administrative group composed of all the academic deans plus some of the Provost staff. Finally, the proposal was reviewed and endorsed by President Nancy Zimpher's cabinet, co-chaired by Provosts Anthony Perzigian and Jane Henney.

WH: The deans, in particular, raised tough questions about the need for or the advisability of such an organization. Why did we need it? Might it become one of those groups that just rewards everyone indiscriminately? And what might those AFTL members then claim for themselves once they'd been so recognized? Their questions were good ones and resulted in a stronger outcome, but those discussions also revealed a lot of skepticism.

BH: The deans were perhaps also wondering if this would weaken the overall faculty emphasis on research. As I see the historical patterns, the only way we eventually got UEC recognition, or the University Teaching Professorship, is that the research equivalents led the way. Existence of the Fellows of the Graduate School may have been a motivation of the deans to support creation of the AFTL.

JB: One of the disappointments of my time as a dean was to witness how little many deans seemed to care about undergraduate education. Conversations in the Deans' Council were dominated by real issues: budgets, enrollments, grant funding, rankings in relation to other universities, construction projects, accreditation, instructional technology, and so on. But the real issues of teaching effectiveness and student learning received little attention 10 to 15 years ago. Indeed, attention to those issues arose mostly as necessary to achieve other ends:

Effective teaching improved student satisfaction, which is necessary for student retention, which is necessary for sustaining enrollments, which is necessary for sustaining the budget. Improving student graduation rates led to higher university rankings. Demonstrating student learning through assessment was driven by outside accreditors.

I echo what Wayne and Bert have suggested above: The creation of AFTL was not a high priority for the deans, and some deans may have worried that it would distract some faculty from traditional research, but its cost was so low that they could hardly object.

A selection committee co-chaired by Deans Andrea Lindell (Nursing) and Larry Johnson (Education) began its work in autumn 2006. One distinctive and important feature of the selection process, continued by every selection committee since that time, was the use of face-to-face interviews with the nominees.

The inaugural class of the AFTL was announced to the UC community in June 2007 and included two faculty from Business, six from CECH, one from Engineering, one from Law, one from Medicine, one from Nursing, one from Pharmacy, and nine from A&S (for a total 21). Since that time, every college at UC has come to be represented through faculty selected for AFTL membership, with over 80 faculty inducted into the AFTL as of autumn 2015.

The first meeting of the AFTL brought the inaugural class together informally at Lathan Camblin's house in autumn 2007. A short business meeting gave way to wine-and-cheese conversations.

Amy Pettigrew was the first president of the AFTL, followed in that office by Catherine Strathern, Linda Plevyak, Kim Jacobs- Beck, Rebecca Leugers, and Nancy Rogers (the current president).

The AFTL Teaching Showcase launched in 2014 and has developed two more programs since then. The Showcase typically brings an external speaker to campus to provide a keynote address and then offers a range of concurrent presentations led by AFTL members as well as other UC faculty.

From its outset, the AFTL was charged with ambitious goals in this area. In the announcement to the UC community of the inaugural class of AFTL members, President Nancy Zimpher and Provosts Anthony J. Perzigian and Jane L. Henney wrote: "We envision the AFTL playing a key leadership role toward improving the quality and depth of the learning experience for UC's students, whether undergraduate and graduate."

In many ways, the AFTL has done an impressive job at recognizing outstanding teaching and also showcasing the pedagogical accomplishments of its members. What has it similarly accomplished, however, in terms of promoting excellent teaching at UC more generally?

WH: One example would certainly come from that Teaching Showcase, which involved a number of faculty outside the ranks of AFTL members as well as some teaching assistants.

The Showcase, however, never involved a very high percentage of UC's classroom teachers. In addition, it tended to be a one-shot faculty-development event, and research suggests that those don't have many lasting effects, especially when they seem to provide mostly preaching to the same choir anyway.

BH: I do recall our strong desire in the early stages to have "CET&L Fellows," that is, AFTL members who would work on projects in the scholarship of teaching and learning, in affiliation with the CET&L. But that idea never got very far, another failing of that whole relationship between the AFTL and the CET&L. The resources were there, but nothing much came of it.

JB: Wayne's comment above about "preaching to the same choir" rings true. When I presented programs for CET&L, I regularly found the same faces in the audience. The same phenomenon was observable for almost every initiative in which I participated (such as the Problem Based Learning project, which launched in the late 1990s but never expanded beyond a core group of faculty). But that seems to be a national phenomenon, not limited to UC at all. Tenured faculty enjoy so much freedom in choosing where to devote their energies and time that any undertaking that doesn't appeal to them individually is likely to receive little attention.

Support from UC's central administration proved to be crucial in the initial launch of the AFTL. Both Nancy Zimpher as UC's president and Tony Perzigian in the Provost Office helped to further those early developments. Once the AFTL had become successfully established, however, its relationship to and dependence upon central administration became less clear. As with any faculty-driven initiative or organization, it had to consider this question: To what extent was support from central administration crucial to the AFTL's ongoing accomplishments and success?

JB: Every university president and provost enjoys a bully pulpit and can exert tremendous influence in how faculty direct their attention and energies. When Joe Steger announced a globalization initiative in 1993, faculty proposals for support and seed-funding dutifully connected whatever they were proposing to globalization. When Nancy Zimpher launched UC|21 ten years later, faculty responded by connecting their projects to that initiative. Some percentage of those connections were obvious pandering; some were earnest efforts to advance institutional priorities.

For at least the last 35 years, though, UC's high-level administrators have consistently and publicly emphasized national research rankings and the importance of research to achieving promotion and tenure. No such consistent, public emphasis on teaching effectiveness has existed over that period. The closest we came was the provost's regular advice in reappointment letters to seek the assistance of CET&L. I credit Tony Perzigian, Kristi Nelson, and especially Wayne for adding that advice to a message that carried a lot of influence with the individual faculty who received it.

When he became provost in 2010, Santa Ono shifted the agenda away from teaching and learning effectiveness, but he was certainly not the only one. Greg Williams too was so focused on rising in the national rankings, and becoming part of AAU, that he wanted to greatly raise admission standards. In other words, make a high-achieving student body not by better educating the students but by not admitting those who took more work to educate.

WH: Ono also confused the priorities through his creation of the Provost Committee on Teaching Excellence (PCOTE), an advisory group that was supposed to recommend ways to enhance, encourage, and reward high-quality teaching. While PCOTE contained some members of the AFTL, it seemed to be duplicating some of the functions that the AFTL had been created to fulfill. One effect of PCOTE, then, was to blur the AFTL's focus and role.

BH: I agree that support from the Provost Office is a necessary condition for AFTL effectiveness. If a provost really pushes teaching effectiveness, and pushes the AFTL to be the leader, then that would certainly help. But provostal support isn't a sufficient condition. A lot still depends on leadership within both the AFTL and the CET&L. Those two organizations can make up for a whole lot of neutral or lackadaisical provostal commitment. So I don't think we can blame the Provost Office for the limited success of the AFTL. It had all the financial resources it knew what to do with.

Part of the problem, as I've already noted, is that significant leadership is necessary within both the CET&L and the AFTL, with a related level of significant collaboration. Without this, we get mainly just a kind of muddling along, which is what I think we have had. Of course the leadership positions in the AFTL are volunteer jobs with essentially no support except what the CET&L might provide. So without that support and with the synergy of a closely cooperative arrangement, the AFTL really hasn't met its goals and will likely continue to have difficulties in this regard.

In September 2011, and looking ahead to semester conversion at UC, the AFTL drafted some recommendations to affect the role of peer review, teaching assessment, and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) within procedures for reappointment, promotion, and tenure (RPT). After all, the initial proposal to create the AFTL had called for it to "advise the President and provosts on matters related to the university's instructional mission."

While the section on teaching assessment ended with considerable specificity in the suggestions, the draft foundered on the issues of peer review ("who reviews and who is reviewed?") and also SoTL: should it "count" on a par with discipline-based research? Is it "best framed as evidence of scholarly teaching?"

This draft never got forwarded, in part because of concerns that these suggestions would never get accepted by the Provost Office, but in part, too, because they identify key aspects of the AFTL's identity that are unsettled and still evolving.

In developing our history here, we found ourselves debating another key question at the heart of the AFTL's identity: what should be the formal and working relationship between the AFTL and

the CET&L? Following the lead of the original draft, the proposal approved by the CET&L Advisory Council sought to define that relationship as “both integrated and symbiotic.” On the one hand, the AFTL (as noted above) would “serve as a resource” to the CET&L; on the other hand, the CET&L was to “provide administrative support” for the AFTL as well as to “facilitate” its operations. While subsequent reviews continued to approve and forward this same language, since the outset of the AFTL its relationship to the CET&L has remained ambiguous, a situation that may help to explain why the AFTL has not yet measured up to what was originally envisioned for its identity.

WH: The nature of this relationship was vague from the start, although that vagueness seemed like a necessary early approach towards creating the AFTL. As things developed from there, however, the ambiguities of the relationship often seemed to me more often to confuse and thus limit the various approaches to pedagogy initiatives rather than to provide a necessary and dynamic flexibility. Who was better positioned to identify the most important priorities? Who was really supposed to be directing which resources?

BH: During the first several years after the AFTL was created, it became clear the agendas and directions of the CET&L and the AFTL were not intersecting as originally envisioned, thereby significantly reducing the effectiveness of both organizations. The original goals of the AFTL to integrate its activities closely to those of the CET&L were not implemented due to ineffective collaboration.

JB: Can AFTL and CET&L work together effectively in their current configurations? The former is a voluntary professional organization composed of people who know they will likely see little recognition or reward for their work on the organization’s behalf. While it has a mission, it has no accountability for achieving that mission. Meanwhile, those faculty have other responsibilities on which they are supposed to be focused. By contrast, CET&L is an office with paid staff, structure, resources, a reasonably clear mission, and accountability for its performance.

Never having been *inside* either AFTL or CET&L, I can’t speak reliably about the relationship between the two; but from the outside, I sensed rivalry more than collaboration between the two: Which was more authoritative on the subject of effectiveness in teaching and student learning? Who would set the agenda for joint efforts? Who would get credit for accomplishments—or blame for failures? Could AFTL count on CET&L to be supportive? Could CET&L count on AFTL to follow through in delivering what its individual fellows promised?

All three of us feel proud of the existence of the AFTL, even while recognizing that it still has not met the lofty goals laid out in the original drafts and approved proposals. As the above comments suggest, its relationship with the CET&L continues to seem problematic, and of course those proposals in the 2011 AFTL draft never got forwarded to UC’s central administration. Big questions remain:

- How might teaching – and student learning – move beyond second-class status at a large

research institution like UC?

- And how might an organization like the AFTL help to make that happen?
- How might the Office of the Provost help focus and support the efforts of AFTL as part of a consistent, public message that its mission is important?
- How might the Office of the Provost help align and build collaborative ties between AFTL and CET&L?

Even as we feel some sense of unfulfilled promise, however, we also note the continued evolution of the AFTL. With the number of AFTL Fellows now having reached a significant mass, we are optimistic that those original goals might yet get accomplished and those remaining questions answered in ways favorable to excellence in classroom teaching and student learning.

To that end, then, we suggest further attempts to define and solidify the relationship between the CET&L and the AFTL. The original vision of what the AFTL might become remains a compelling one. Noted above, as part of the language of the formal proposal through all of its various stages, that vision is worth citing one more time here at the end:

Through its activities, the AFTL is expected to significantly influence the present and future directions of higher education at UC, and at the State and national levels. It will recognize faculty who have made significant and extended contributions to excellence in scholarly teaching as well as in the scholarship of teaching and learning. And it will create a culture that promotes pedagogical innovation, experimentation, assessment, and scholarship.

Discuss.