

Editorial: The Academy of Fellows for Teaching and Learning, Its Continuing Growth and Future Directions. Discussing.

A response to “The Academy of Fellows for Teaching and Learning, Its Origins and Future Directions. Discuss.” by Bryan, Hall, and Huether

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In the fall 2016 issue of *The Journal for Research and Practice in College Teaching*, Bryan, Hall and Heuther reviewed the history of the University of Cincinnati’s Academy of Fellows for Teaching and Learning (AFTL). In this editorial, they asked key questions about the achievements of the AFTL and its place in the university. These key questions echo concerns of faculty development and the value of teaching and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in the academy that continue to be asked by teaching and learning centers in academia. Bryan, Hall, and Heuther (2016) ask how the AFTL has raised the status of teaching at the university, developed relationships with other faculty development organizations, and cultivated support in the university administration. At the root of these questions is whether the AFTL is being effective in its mission to place students at the center, grow research excellence in the scholarship of teaching and learning, achieve academic excellence, and forge key relationships that advance pedagogy at the University of Cincinnati.

They asked the current membership to discuss. In response, members met for a brainstorming session where the key questions were discussed as small groups, and then refined in a gallery walk activity to consolidate ideas. What follows is part of the discussion.

The UC AFTL began in 2007. These key questions represent larger questions that take time to develop and become institutional practice. It is important to continue to ask these questions as the AFTL works to address them within the context of a sometimes glacial pace of change in the academy. In the greater scheme of things, eight years may be an eternity in industry, but it is the blink of an eye at a university.

Has the AFTL raised the status of teaching in relation to research and scholarship?

The AFTL Teaching Showcase has played a major role in promoting the status of scholarly teaching at UC. As a refereed conference, it has been a showcase for teaching accomplishments and innovations. In addition, its strength is that it served as an opportunity to mentor faculty in the research related to SoTL. In a meeting of the membership, the Teaching Showcase, now known as LT@UC, was frequently mentioned as a significant effort of promoting scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, the membership did express that this conference could be more widely publicized in the local community. To this end, the new incarnation, LT@UC, is expanding the call for proposals beyond UC to include faculty from other institutions and more closely link presentations at the conference to publication in the *Journal for Research and Practice in College Teaching*.

Another way that the AFTL is promoting teaching at the university, in a broader spectrum, is through this teaching focused, peer reviewed journal, *The Journal for Research and Practice in College Teaching*. The journal was started in 2014 by four members of the AFTL to

be a place to share the SoTL work of faculty. After two years of planning, the first volume was published in Spring of 2016. As the AFTL continues to promote scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning, this journal provides a venue to make this teaching public.

The AFTL serves as the one of the main university-wide recognition of teaching excellence. However, we do not note a university-wide acceptance of the importance of scholarly teaching, especially in terms of Reappointment, Promotion and Tenure (RPT) in all UC departments in spite of the professional recognition of the AFTL and research presentations by members. RPT criteria are housed in each academic unit, and there are not university-wide criteria, thus the path toward university-wide acceptance can only be accomplished unit by unit. Each individual unit determines the criteria, and while the Provost could provide a recommendation for a unit to consider including teaching excellence, it is the faculty in the unit who create and update the RPT criteria based on their individual mission. Academic units in teaching colleges have embraced and emphasized the importance in RPT criteria that correspond to their college workload expectations where teaching is the major component. In these colleges, excellence in teaching is indeed included as a major part of the RPT criteria, though particular to each unit. In other colleges, which have workload documents that stress research as the major component, SoTL and documented excellence in teaching are a relatively small portion of the RPT criteria, if included at all. This systemic difference necessarily exists due to the nature of a Research I institution, one with 15 different colleges with varying purposes.

Individual instructors, both tenure-track (professors) and non-tenure track (educators), in many colleges, but not necessarily all departments, have advanced SoTL in their own teaching, but that has not been matched within the RPT criteria. That is not to imply that there is a lack of support for excellence in teaching, just that the support is not incorporated formally in the RPT criteria. AFTL members note that the percentages allotted within each college's workload document necessarily reflects that some units and colleges have different RPT expectations. The greater question is how faculty can be recognized and rewarded for excellence in teaching within the college workload and departmental RPT criteria, even in those units where the majority of the workload is research. In addition, how could such units be converted to the belief that uninformed teaching, or the lack of interest in pursuing teaching excellence, is unacceptable even in research departments and colleges? Is this actually the challenge the AFTL faces?

In spite of these difficulties, the AFTL membership has been responsible for significant scholarship in the area of teaching and learning. Members regularly present not only locally and within UC, but at international, national and regional conferences. These conferences are peer-reviewed, and as a result of these conference paper presentations, many result in peer-reviewed publications. One metric to determine the impact of scholarship is the number of further citations. Perhaps a service that the AFTL could provide would be tracking of publications by AFTL members to further publicize the contributions to research by excellent teachers.

Has the AFTL cultivated support in the university administration?

Many faculty support the importance of excellence in teaching being in the forefront of UC's public face. AFTL members have cited that this would require a modification in how the President and Provost interact within the University, as well as with the Board of Trustees and public at large. Suggestions include that the highest level administrators publically recognize the AFTL and its importance to our mission with donors, with members of the press, in marketing, and in public and private meetings with the Board of Trustees. When describing UC's mission,

teaching and student learning need to be concurrent with the importance of other research at the University. Indeed, research into teaching and learning is a well-known form of research even in such disciplines as in the health professions, sciences, and engineering. These suggestions, however, call for action from the administrative offices. It is important to consider what the AFTL membership can do to effect this change.

The second prong to modify the presentation and importance of teaching and learning would be to have AFTL members consult on Presidential/Provostal initiatives relating to teaching, and to have a seat at the table on appropriate central administration working groups/committees. Part of the challenge of the relationship between the AFTL and administrative offices may be related to the fragmentation of administrative support. This difficulty is illustrated by the varied administrative divisions of faculty development in the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CET&L), the Center for Excellence in eLearning (CEeL), the University Center for Instructional Technology (UCIT), the University of Cincinnati Blue Ash Learning and Teaching Center (UCBA L&TC) as well as Provostal supplemental funds for faculty development administered through each college. All five of the above mentioned faculty development organizations are overseen by a different Provost, Vice President, or Dean. Part of the solution to identify each faculty development organization's contribution to excellent teaching might be increased coordination among these organizations, not only at the local level but also in the Provost's Office.

Has the AFTL developed relationships with other faculty development organizations?

The relationship between AFTL and CET&L, as well as with eLearning groups does exist. While the relationship does not lend itself to simple cooperation, the first ever collaborative effort, LT@UC, a peer-reviewed conference, has taken place. This conference, where one year is envisioned as a UC-centered one, followed by a regionally-centered one the following year, is a good first step toward the collaboration initially envisioned. Over the past three years, participation has grown from 94 participants to 130 participants, while the number of faculty presenters has varied from 20 each year with a high of 35 in 2015. While these participants were representative of colleges across the university, and presenters expressed enthusiasm for presenting in this venue, these are still small numbers. The AFTL has not clearly leveraged the power of having members in the majority of university colleges to generate greater participation in such events. Since the first iteration of the LT@UC conference, planning has been a bit broader for the second, and the CET&L has added AFTL members to its advisory group.

Is the AFTL just another CV item to list rather than a group working toward the goals of promoting excellence in teaching?

A pressing concern is whether the AFTL has become just an honorary club. AFTL faculty note that the admission process is rigorous. Membership requires substantive recommendations from a dean/unit head, other AFTL faculty, and students in addition to an application and statement describing the candidate's accomplishments in teaching. Candidates are interviewed about what they see as their possible future role in the AFTL. Those who do not have a record of research in SoTL, substantive activities in areas related to pedagogy, or

recommendations that do not explicate their probable importance or activities in the organization, do not have their names forwarded as recommended candidates.

In general, participation at AFTL regular meetings is less than half of the 71 people included in the active membership. Ironically, this is often due to conflicting teaching schedules. In addition, travel from the regional campuses sometimes impedes participation for faculty from those campuses. Thus, it appears that there is a relatively small percentage of the members who regularly participate in activities. Clearly, the AFTL needs to examine the timing and location of meetings, as well as the requirements for continued active membership. One suggestion is that active membership be incentivized. Participation in AFTL activities could result in funds being made available to the AFTL member, based on the level of activity, e.g., a minor amount for attending meetings, more for presenting a workshop or Teaching Showcase session, a bit more for serving on a committee, and even more for serving as an officer. We are confident the Executive Board could develop a plan for members to consider before the start of the next academic year.

Is there an identity problem?

The challenge for the AFTL has been in promoting excellent teaching at UC more generally. The AFTL includes members from the majority of the colleges at the university. Five of the members have gone on to become deans, thus the high value of teaching is moving into a new generation of leadership. Four members have been leaders of the UCBA L&TC that prominently highlights teaching as equal work to research and scholarship. While the influence of the AFTL continues to develop, it is not always recognized. For example, while AFTL members may offer workshops and develop learning communities, it is not explicitly marketed as an AFTL activity, and these efforts are already supported by the structures of the faculty development centers. The AFTL does not have an established structure for offering faculty development. As a result, the AFTL will continue to be supportive, but not innovative, as long as it promotes excellent teaching in the style of the faculty development centers. Given its independent funding, the AFTL might consider approaching promoting excellent teaching outside of the traditional workshop style.

One challenge the AFTL faces, in terms of participation, is organization. Relying on the CET&L and the UCBA L&TC for the structures of advertising and organizing events creates an unclear relationship between the AFTL and these faculty development organizations. In addition, to this mix of organizations that support teaching, the CEeL has been added to the university community to promote “an eLearning environment that maximizes student engagement and realizes UC’s Third Century Goal of excelling in eLearning” (“Center for Excellence in eLearning”, 2017). Clearly, the goal of promoting excellence in teaching is shared by all four of these organizations. The challenge for the AFTL is to articulate an innovative approach to promoting excellent teaching, unique to itself. This is, perhaps, one of the AFTL’s most important future directions.

Future Directions

While the AFTL has continued to develop in helping to support scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning through working with the other faculty development organizations of the university, cultivating excellent teachers who become deans and leaders in

faculty development, and providing venues for making good teaching public, there is still more work to do. In terms of raising the status of teaching in relation to research and scholarship, future directions include revitalizing the membership to more active participation, identifying the AFTL's unique voice in fostering excellent teaching, and promoting greater communication among the faculty development organizations in the Provost's Office. In addition, AFTL members could support each other in department RPT processes to recognize scholarly teaching and SoTL as valued activities for promotion. To cultivate support at administrative levels, the AFTL could more actively pursue representation in Provostal initiatives to develop teaching and learning. This participation could be facilitated by the AFTL being able to clearly identify a unique contribution to faculty development both in cooperation with other faculty development groups on campus but also as its own singular contribution. All of these future directions require clear organization to energize participation. The AFTL already stands out as an organization of faculty who value the skills required to help students make the most of their education. This energy just needs to be focused, then great things can happen.

References

Bryan J., Hall, W., and Huether, C. (2016). The Academy of Fellows for Teaching and Learning, Its Origins and Future Directions. Discuss. *The Journal for Research and Practice in College Teaching* 1(1): 1-9.

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