

Editorial: Sharpening the Academy of Fellows for Teaching and Learning's Vision: How do we strengthen our brand?

A response to "The Academy of Fellows for Teaching and Learning, Its Origins and Future Directions. Discussing," by Ruth Benander and Deborah Page

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In the editorial by Bryan, Hall and Heuther (2016), these founding members of the Academy for Fellows of Teaching and Learning (AFTL) at the University of Cincinnati asked 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. In a response to this 2016 reflection on the progress of the AFTL, Benander and Page (2017) responded by outlining the challenges to the AFTL distinguishing itself from the other faculty development organizations at the university. Benander and Page suggested that the AFTL develop a unique voice in the discussion. They suggested more active membership participation to support teaching in their departmental RPT processes, pursue participation in provostal initiatives to promote excellence in teaching, and cultivate a unique contribution to faculty development not covered by other organizations at the university.

As we move into 2018, the University of Cincinnati is developing a new one-stop Faculty Enrichment Center as one of nine pathways in the University's new strategic direction - *Next Lives Here*. As of 2018, we have the following organizations that focus on the development of teaching:

- The Academy for Fellows of Teaching and Learning
- The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
- The Center for Excellence in eLearning
- IT@UC Learning Technology Services
- The Faculty Enrichment Center

Given the wide variety of organizations, some faculty, some administrative, it seems increasingly important to highlight and distinguish the AFTL brand.

The University of Cincinnati has a strong commitment to research as can be seen in the amount of money devoted to the Office of Research. This office provides substantial professional development opportunities to faculty to further their research agendas. While the University administration says teaching is the primary focus of the institution, it does not have an integrated office to provide professional development opportunities to faculty to advance their teaching equivalent to the Office of Research. The AFTL is one of a handful of organizations and offices that address teaching as a scholarly enterprise. Unfortunately, the AFTL has not raised its profile at the University at a level commensurate with the Office of Research such that many administrators and faculty are not aware of the mission or purpose of the AFTL. If teaching is to be elevated as a co-equal branch of faculty work, then those who have been recognized for their quality teaching should advocate more vigorously for a better integrated system of professional development for teaching that is responsive to the actual needs of faculty members across ranks, time of service, and full/part time status.

One view of the AFTL is that it is an honor society that provides funding for members to present at teaching related conferences. Of course, we have more elevated expectations, but for all intents and purposes, this basic identity is the one that has been most consistent over time. In the past, the AFTL hosted the teaching oriented Teaching Showcase in early Spring Semester, but that has since given way to the LT@UC October conference hosted by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, UC@IT eLearning, UC Libraries, and the AFTL. While this is a rich collaboration, it reduces the AFTL to a funding source and provider of most of the presentations, not a unique voice.

The unique voice that seems to be emerging from the AFTL is funding for the scholarship and teaching and learning research projects that is not available through other sources at the University. Former university president Santa Ono provided the AFTL with funds to support AFTL members' SoTL projects to advance new knowledge about best pedagogical practices. This fund is currently supporting research in several studies.

One study investigates how first year students would like to be appropriately supported in their composition courses to address issues of equity and inclusion. The objective of this research

is to assess student needs for success in the English Composition, Reading, and Communication programs and, based on these needs assessments, design course activities and support systems that address those needs. Results from this case study should allow composition instructors to design better teaching environments, materials, and methods, which should lead to more success in the introductory courses in our programs, particularly for students from at-risk populations. In relation to this research, the AFTL funds are also supporting the invitation to a speaker who is an expert in diversity and inclusion to speak on the topic, Dr. Robin Martin. Dr. Martin has extensive experience in strategic planning, cultural competency, program development, and diversity and inclusion initiatives. These initiatives fulfil the mission of the AFTL in promoting innovation and research in support of excellent teaching.

Another SoTL study currently supported by AFTL funding is concerned with the impact of study abroad. The purpose of the study is to better assess the long-term impact of study abroad by exploring how past participants perceive their study abroad experience and its impact on their careers, education, and world views. This study will assist in further assessing and developing meaningful intercultural education endeavors. The researchers plan to survey past participants of study abroad programs from 2003 programs to 2017 programs concerning what they remember of their experiences. Researchers will compare students' memories of social events, academic excursions, and academic course work during the programs. In addition, the researchers will examine how students' professional and personal lives have been affected by their study abroad experiences.

Along with funding SoTL studies, the AFTL has also supported these efforts in its university teaching journal, *The Journal for Research and Practice in College Teaching*. Supporting SoTL projects and a venue for sharing that research is unique to this organization and a contribution to the university community that might be more widely communicated.

The AFTL is also supporting a university faculty mentoring project. This provostal initiative proposes a unique interdisciplinary Faculty Development Community (FDC) focused on broadly developing faculty mentors for mentoring faculty, with representatives from every UC college. While most faculty members have participated in or are at least aware of faculty

communities to enhance writing and research productivity, very few are aware of the recent and significant literature on faculty mentoring. Evidence shows that effective mentoring dramatically increases faculty teaching and research productivity, their commitment to their home institutions, higher rates of career and job satisfaction, and higher rates of promotion and tenure. The goal of this FDC is to develop a unique, interdisciplinary community of faculty who are trained in the theory and practice of faculty mentoring and who will emerge as experts on mentoring within their disciplines and across the university.

In addition to funding SoTL and faculty mentoring, the AFTL has a unique opportunity to contribute to the new Faculty Enrichment Center (FEC) initiative. The proposed FEC mission is to provide a physical and virtual space for faculty members to work together and with other members of the UC community in an atmosphere that encourages professional and personal growth. The mission of the AFTL is to strive 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. The specific topics in the mission overlap and support each other. The AFTL has a unique opportunity to provide advisory and consultative services to the FEC. It is particularly important that the AFTL help the FEC identify gaps in current professional development services and offer expertise and volunteer service to help provide programming to fill the gaps of the current offerings. The experience and successes of AFTL members will be an important resource as the FEC hopes to support faculty across the career lifecycle. The AFTL members can model strong participation and take a leadership role in some of the faculty-led programming, for example by leading a university-wide faculty learning community, suggested as a future activity during meetings of the AFTL during the last academic year as an activity to encourage AFTL members to continue their professional growth in SoTL. AFTL members, given their participation in and exposure to SoTL nationwide, can bring best practices to the FEC and benefit all UC faculty. Additionally, the AFTL can advocate for university policies that encourage innovative teaching, including interdisciplinary work.

As the AFTL seeks to find its unique brand, it would appear that the support of SoTL and faculty mentoring are initiatives that are specific to this organization. It is possible that the opportunities offered by consulting with the new Faculty Enrichment Center might further

distinguish the AFTL from other faculty development organizations at the university. Perhaps a more consistent vision of what the AFTL can do in the realm of SoTL might better focus AFTL efforts or spur more participation on the part of the membership. Until this vision is better focused such that more active participation in AFTL meetings and programming can result in more visible activities, the AFTL will remain an honorary funding source rather than rise as a force for innovative teaching.