

Perceptible Attributes of a Vibrant Teaching and Learning Environment

[In which a “positive restlessness” (Kuh) abounds]

- The institution has high expectations for student learning.
- There is consensus on learning outcomes at several levels throughout the institution that is evident through an audit of course syllabi and department/program assessment plans, course catalogues, and through conversations with students.
- Evidence of students attaining learning outcomes is regularly gathered, discussed, and acted upon.
- Faculty and staff gather frequently (both regularly and spontaneously) for evidential (as well as anecdotal) conversations about learning. Highly visible and highly regarded gatherings are held at least annually. “How do you know?” questions are frequently heard (and expected) during the discourse occurring at these gatherings.
- There is a critical mass (*e.g.* 10-20%) of faculty involved in SoTL projects at any one time, even though membership of this group will ideally change from year to year. However, the vast majority of faculty regularly engage in structured reflection about their teaching and continually work to improve student learning.
- Institutional data (including data from SoTL projects) informs what is transpiring in the classroom and in other learning experiences for students.
- The institution (faculty, administration, staff, students, alumni, and trustees) carefully examines data from sources such as the NSSE or the Wabash National Study, chooses high impact practices on which to focus, and then engages in action research (without being too fussy about methods – always triangulating, always acting) systematically (Bok, 2006) to improve the educational experiences of students.
- Students are routinely employed as sources of meaningful information about the educational environment. Students provide this information by completing surveys or other instruments to measure whether learning outcomes are attained. They can also help gather information by interviewing other students or participating in focus groups used to generate narrative data.
- SoTL activities matter when hiring new faculty, helping faculty develop, and making promotion and tenure decisions. A manifestation of this is department chairs encouraging faculty to engage in SoTL endeavors.
- A point person (or office), whose professional self-worth derives from the institution being a vibrant teaching and learning environment, has an administration-level appointment at the institution. While broadly shared ownership of improving student learning is essential, the point person coordinates and organizes the multifarious activities involved in this endeavor.

Structured Reflection Questions

Do concepts about “Great Teachers and Great Colleges” seem sufficient to you? What would you add?

Which “attributes” seem most appropriate and attainable? What’s missing from the list?

Do you think the SoTL mini-grant program would help achieve the attributes of a vibrant teaching and learning environment at your institution?