Investigating Institutional Barriers and Resources for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT. Family Science faculty interested in engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) may encounter barriers at various levels of their institutions—barriers that potentially threaten success of SoTL efforts and overall career advancement. I reflect on such barriers and share data-driven conclusions to illustrate how faculty could assess and build on existing institutional resources to help transform institutional cultures that support and embrace SoTL. Results from my investigation suggest that at my university, there were relatively few explicit or perceived barriers. However, there were also few resources to foster cross-campus collaborations that could facilitate broad-based, impactful SoTL that could help attract external funding.

Keywords: SoTL, university support, faculty perceptions

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The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) can be a valuable means to improving teaching and student learning outcomes. Although there are various definitions and parameters for what can constitute SoTL (Richlin, 2001), this article refers to SoTL as the study of teaching and learning that results in scholarly outputs such as presentations and publications (McKinney, 2006). As such, SoTL can also be a source of research that contributes to objectives of a university and advancement of a university faculty member's career (Hutchings, Hubler, & Ciccone, 2011). However, barriers at various institutional levels often hinder production of impactful SoTL and dissuade scholars who would otherwise be interested from engaging in SoTL (McKinney, 2015).

The desire to engage in SoTL indicates strong commitment to effectively educating our students (Kreber, 2014). As scholars and educators in family science, we may have deep interests in how our teaching approaches best help students embrace and apply course content, especially when we know that many students will use their educational backgrounds to serve families and communities. Moreover, SoTL is connected to the 10th Family Life Education Content Area, which includes evaluating educational programming (National Council on Family Relations, 2014). However, most of our training and experience is probably connected to researching topics unrelated to the teaching process. Broader support from and within our institutions can help those of us who are serious about including SoTL in our overall research agendas produce meaningful SoTL.

Drawing on my interests in SoTL, I began a process to investigate potential barriers to and resources for SoTL at my university, which included a small study of local faculty perceptions. I have been exploring ways to help potentially transform my university's climate to one that minimizes barriers and maximizes support for producing SoTL. In this reflective article, I share procedures and data-driven conclusions to illustrate steps others could take to play roles in addressing SoTL on diverse levels at their higher learning institutions, often by using a bottom-up (i.e., faculty driven) approach. Such efforts should also help facilitate successful SoTL for individual scholars.

Investigating the Institution

I began focusing on SoTL at the institutional level when my department was tasked with dividing up certain goals encompassed in our university's strategic plan. One of these goals was to increase external funding for SoTL. My own interests in SoTL led me to volunteer to work on the task, but I was a bit skeptical. My first impression was that those providing external funding to the university would have little interest in helping improve its teaching—that would be the university's job. Upon further reflection, I suspected that when SoTL clearly advances knowledge of how students learn in general, and how to promote such learning, the university would be more likely to attract external funding. Large, diverse samples of students could be helpful for testing teaching approaches with broad application (Kern, Mettetal, Dixson, & Morgan, 2015). Interdisciplinary collaborations that test teaching approaches likely have advantages over discipline-specific efforts (e.g., Goldschmidt, Bachman, DiMattio, & Warker,

2016). Similarly, SoTL with these characteristics would likely attract attention from top-tier education-oriented scholarly journals. Such scholarship would have to be deeply rooted in scientific knowledge and theory, indicating explicitly how it would advance science related to learning (Wilson-Doenges & Gurung, 2013). Engaging in this type of SoTL would clearly require large investment by faculty members. If one's institution undervalues such research and there is little support to sustain such an investment, faculty members—especially those without tenure—might feel safer investing elsewhere (Schwartz & Haynie, 2013; Williams et al., 2013).

A potential source of institutional support for SoTL is an office dedicated to advancement of teaching, a common entity at many universities (Schwartz & Haynie, 2013). I contacted staff at our Office of Educational Excellence, which hosts a variety of teaching workshops, to see if they offered any such resource regarding SoTL. Since little that focused specifically on producing SoTL was offered, I received an invitation to take the lead on conducting a potential workshop (or what some refer to as Faculty Learning Communities, which are akin to education-oriented support groups). Before deciding to commit additional time and effort into promoting SoTL, I endeavored to learn the extent to which unforeseen institutional barriers might hinder any of my possible future efforts with SoTL on a more institutional level. Eventually, my efforts would help catalyze a bottom-up movement to generate resources and new ideas across campus, with the goal of transforming the university culture into one that fully supports and promotes SoTL as a legitimate, important element of scholarship.

Potential Barriers

Championing SoTL alone would be futile (Williams et al., 2013). Through a campus-wide online survey, I was able to recruit about 25 faculty members willing to brainstorm ideas for promoting a supportive atmosphere for SoTL. Ultimately, eight individuals formed an official Knowledge Group (i.e., a precursor to a center or institute) to help carry out efforts to explore and address possible barriers to faculty investing time in SoTL. These barriers relate to the extent to which the university values SoTL, levels of familiarity faculty have with the science behind learning, and capacity to engage in broad-based projects.

Does the University Value SoTL?

Universities arguably have much to gain by valuing and facilitating SoTL. For example, the knowledge their faculty produces, related to innovations in pedagogy and assessment, can be applied to benefit their own students (Bernstein, 2013). Furthermore, universities receive greater visibility and esteem thorough recognition of faculty scholarship of any form, as long as it is high quality and rigorous (Bernstein, 2013; Trigwell, 2013). Some campuses are clearly committed to supporting SoTL as manifested in their commitment, reward system, and administrative structure (see Kenny, Watson, & Desmarais, 2016). Some have actively provided funding for SoTL through various institutes and centers (see Amundsen, Emmioglu, Hotton, Hum, & Xin, 2016). My home university's strategic plan specifically mentioned increasing external SoTL funding (and referred to increasing SoTL-based journal article publications). However, it was possible that there were institutional disincentives related to SoTL, regardless of stated university missions and goals.

Institutional acceptance and support for SoTL is likely to be manifested in some of its policies. Promotion and tenure (P & T) policies and salary or merit policies could hinder SoTL if it is not truly valued (Burns, Merchant, & Appelt, 2013; Schwartz & Haynie, 2013). A student helper and I accessed the university P & T document, the university salary document, and corresponding college and department/school documents. A basic content analysis revealed it was standard procedure for P & T documents to mirror the university document by listing the four types of scholarship articulated in the Boyer model of scholarship (Boyer, 1990): scholarship of discovery, scholarship of integration, scholarship of application, and scholarship of teaching. Nearly all documents made no value judgements about any of these types of scholarship. Two departments explicitly favored scholarship of discovery. One department made it clear that all four forms are valued. A similar process ensued with the salary documents; these provided no definition of scholarship and were silent on issues specific to SoTL.

One challenge in such a review is the lack of a clear usage of the phrase "scholarship of teaching and learning." Since the official university definition of scholarship does not use that phrase but does use "scholarship of teaching," we carried out our review with the assumption that "scholarship of teaching" represented SoTL the closest, at least for purposes of this investigation. SoTL can arguably be categorized as discovery or integration (Schwartz & Haynie, 2013), but we believed that most faculty and administrators would associate SoTL with "scholarship of teaching," as is often the case (Schwartz & Haynie, 2013). Nevertheless, some precision of understanding may be missed due to ambiguity of terminology.

On paper, it appeared that SoTL was not systematically discouraged, but it was possible that in practice (or at least perception of practice) barriers toward recognition of SoTL as valuable in the context of career advancement still existed. At times, SoTL has had a reputation as being anti-intellectual or non-empirical, which led academic leadership and colleagues to look down on it (Boshier, 2009). The nature of one's institutional culture related to SoTL can be a key factor in whether faculty engage in SoTL (Haigh, Gossman, & Jiao, 2011). To address this factor, we designed a questionnaire about "the climate surrounding scholarship" at our university and distributed it to all faculty through the university communications system. Some specifics about the survey its results are shared for illustrative purposes, mainly to provide context for the eventual actions taken to help promote SoTL at my institution and to model steps of a procedure to follow for that same purpose.

A total of 236 faculty responded to the survey. Faculty demographics are unknown because, at the time, the purpose of the survey was merely to investigate overall perceptions. However, faculty represented all seven of the academic colleges at that time, with a plurality from the College of Sciences and Humanities (42%), the largest college at the university (i.e., had the greatest number of departments at the time, 20). The fewest responses were from the College of Communication, Information, and Media (4%), one of the smallest colleges (i.e., had only four departments). Based on full time, tenured/tenure line faculty full time equivalency (FTE) by college, the proportion of survey representation from each college almost mirrored the relative sizes of each college. (My college was somewhat overrepresented, perhaps due to support from my colleagues. The college of Fine Arts was underrepresented, possibly due to minimal research expectations within that college).

Several survey items focused on the extent to which faculty perceived that the four types of scholarship that the university listed were "emphasized (i.e. encouraged, praised)" at different levels of the institution: "the university as a whole," "leadership in [one's] college (e.g., by Dean, P & T committees, Salary Committee)," and "leadership in [one's] department/school (e.g., by department chair, P & T committees, Salary Committees)." Again, we relied upon language in official university documents to distinguish among different types of scholarship, acknowledging the potential for some ambiguity of perceptions, as mentioned above. Faculty could sort each scholarship type into four distinct boxes with these labels: "most emphasized," "somewhat emphasized," "not emphasized," and "discouraged." Each box could contain more than one scholarship type (i.e., discovery and teaching could both be "somewhat emphasized"). Table 1 includes percentages for each response (level of encouragement) for each scholarship type for each level of the institution. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) compared the perceived level of encouragement for the scholarship of teaching at each of the three institutional levels by the college of the respondent. One's college was not associated with any perceptions; there were too many departments for such a comparison to be tested statistically. Overall, SoTL appeared to be perceived as somewhat emphasized at the institution (about one-half of the respondents thought this was the case at university, college, and department leadership levels), with sizable proportions seeing SoTL as the most important scholarly emphasis (about 30% for the university, 25% for their college, and 28% for their department). Very few perceived any leadership level to discourage SoTL (about 3% to 5%). See Table 1.

Faculty were also asked (to the extent it applied) how they believed their "scholarship of teaching affects [their] progress towards promotion or tenure?" They were asked the same question about their merit pay. A subsample of 117 responded to these questions (probably because of the other faculty not participating in SoTL or because they had contracts unaffected by scholarly performance). Table 2 includes percentages of faculty who perceived being affected "very negatively" to "very positively." Regarding P & T, about 57% thought SoTL affected them positively or very positively, with only about 7% affected negatively or very negatively. Respondents showed a little more hesitation regarding merit pay. About 12% thought it affected them very negatively, while less than 40% thought it affected them positively or very positively. Similarly, faculty reported the extent to which they believed their SoTL "affects how [they] are perceived by the leadership in [their] college/department/school"…and by "[their] colleagues at [the] university." Results in Table 2 show that faculty generally perceived their local leadership to value SoTL more than their colleagues did (about 65% reported leaders' perceptions to be bolstered by SoTL, compared to about 52% who thought colleagues were impressed with their SoTL). ANOVAs compared the four different types of perceptions by respondents' colleges, indicating that only their perceptions about how local leaders value one's SoTL efforts differed, with faculty from the business college reporting less positivity than most others did. See Table 2.

Faculty were able to type comments about their responses regarding how they thought their SoTL affected them professionally. A few illustrative negative comments help clarify potential barriers to engaging in SoTL. Several commented on it being "much more difficult to obtain external grants to the university to support scholarship of teaching. The university reward system very much recognizes success in obtaining external grants…" Some noted that leaders or colleagues perceived SoTL as being "second class" or "not appreciated as a true form of scholarship." "[Taking] time away from the scholarship of discovery" or "from doing [one's]

discipline specific research" was seen as a tradeoff that could hinder professional advancement and prestige, even if SoTL overall "is not viewed upon in a negative way." Finally, sometimes SoTL carried negative associations: "My colleagues associate SOTL with assessment issues, which they usually seek to avoid." Such observations are not new to SoTL researchers (McKinney, 2015).

In sum, I concluded that faculty engaging in SoTL at my university would most likely find few institutional roadblocks to doing so. There were strong signs that actively helping to promote an atmosphere conducive to SoTL on campus would receive little official pushback. However, perceptions can vary by discipline and academic unit. It would be wise for any faculty to consult with local leadership regarding scholarship output and issues of career advancement.

Faculty Knowledge and Time

Another potential barrier to SoTL involves how much faculty know about the numerous theories and expansive body of research related to teaching and learning. Family science scholars typically have one or more content areas where they have invested time and effort at mastery; SoTL might serve only as a secondary line of research. However, knowing and staying current with the science behind teaching and learning so that one can identify gaps in the research and design a theoretically sound study may not be a realistic goal for a secondary line of research (Walls, 2016). Consequently, faculty may find it difficult to immerse themselves in a way that allows them to produce impactful SoTL.

An office dedicated to enhancement of teaching may provide resources to SoTL scholars (Schwartz & Haynie, 2013) to help compensate for their lack of background knowledge in the science of learning, even if the office lacks an emphasis on producing SoTL. Ideally, working with someone well versed in foundational SoTL theories and research can save significant time and energy. Finding such individuals might require reaching beyond family studies faculty. I am fortunate enough to work at a university that includes an educational psychology department, complete with doctoral students looking for opportunities to publish their manuscripts. I have been able to work with faculty in this department to help coordinate efforts among faculty, graduate students, and SoTL researchers from other departments. Collaborators who focus on theoretical and knowledge base elements of a particular SoTL project while the family science scholar focuses on more discipline-related samples and teaching methods can be a productive combination for all involved.

Broad-based Projects

As noted above, if attracting external funding and publishing empirically sophisticated and impactful journal articles are important goals for family scholars interested in SoTL, developing studies with broader application to general learning processes would be helpful. Such studies would likely include large, diverse, and inter-disciplinary samples (Tomcho & Foels, 2009), hence the need for campus networking. Family science SoTL scholars are especially likely to share interests with SoTL scholars from other social science disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, social work, political science) due to some similarity and overlap of content. Application-oriented social sciences scholars might have similar interests in studying

how students apply course content outside the classroom to better their personal lives, relationships, and communities. Campus networking can be challenging, however.

Williams and colleagues (2013) made a compelling case for social networking throughout a campus as a means to weave SoTL into the campus culture. Various levels of connection from the micro (individual faculty efforts), through the meso (department and college leadership and their efforts to connect the micro and macro), to the macro (institutional leadership and vision) can combine to champion a SoTL-friendly culture. Within the micro-level, having collaborators from various disciplines may be necessary to creating large, diverse samples with broader generalization potential. Support from those higher in the hierarchy helps facilitate cross-campus networking when the campus culture truly values SoTL. Otherwise, finding collaborators can be quite time consuming and fruitless, especially if one has little contact with or knowledge of others outside their program or department.

In our case, it appeared that for the time being, much of the effort to form social networks would (at least initially) need to have a bottom-up approach—but this approach leveraged existing university resources. With input and feedback from my team, we worked with our university's website development staff and resources to establish a website that allows our institution's faculty to join an online community forum dedicated to connecting SoTL researchers interested in collaboration. Members set up personal profiles that include their unit affiliations, types of teaching they are involved in (e.g. online, experiential, etc.), past and present SoTL projects, and current and future interests or ideas related to SoTL. A search function allows members to seek out others with similar interests, identify them, and work collaboratively. The website also includes information about SoTL publication outlets and conferences. Adding and organizing content, and advertising this new resource, has required significant time. Through mass emails and by visiting training meetings for new faculty, we have built a nucleus of a network. We intend to continue to visit faculty meetings and cultivate a large, diverse data base of SoTL researchers who are willing to work together.

Conclusion

Based on literature addressing university culture related to SoTL (Kenny, Watson, & Desmarais, 2016; Schwartz & Haynie, 2013; Williams et al., 2013), it appears that our observations and experiences of university barriers of SoTL are not uncommon or new. Current efforts to transform the university culture into one that more fully supports and advances SoTL effort are still in the early stages, but I believe these efforts can be a helpful to facilitating collaboration. It was informative to confirm that, on the whole, there appeared to be no explicit, insurmountable institutional barriers that would hinder faculty from dedicating significant time and efforts to SoTL. However, other institution-oriented barriers may exist. For example, a university Institutional Review Board could have policies and procedures that limit access to students as research subjects and additional steps for conducting such research, which create disincentives for researchers. Various barriers can also exist within any given department; these are a key factor in faculty success (Williams et al., 2013). In particular, I advise junior faculty who are interested in SoTL to discuss SoTL with their immediate supervisors, P & T committees, and others who influence their career advancement. Some educating may be necessary to convince those in power that SoTL can be just as rigorous (or flawed) and profound

(or superficial) as any other type of research—depending on the methodology of a given study (Trigwell, 2013; Wilson-Doenges, Troisi, Bartsch, & 2017). Departments that house family science programs likely vary in their attitudes and support toward SoTL. This is an interesting topic that could be systematically investigated.

Sufficient support for impactful SoTL may not exist at a given institution. Existing policies could discourage SoTL. Early on, we discovered that some individuals of influence on campus believed that the university would find justification for expanding resources only after collaborative groups of faculty successfully obtained significant external funding for SoTL. Yet we felt that expanding resources would increase the likelihood of successfully obtaining external funding. Thus, our approach was one of incremental growth, working to catalyze and link existing university resources to facilitating more collaborative efforts across campus. Family science scholars who find others with similar SoTL interests and objectives can slowly build momentum toward new networks of individuals who can lay a foundation for scholarship that is larger in significance, broader in scope, and more potentially impactful.

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Table 1.

Perceived Amounts of Emphasis for Types of Scholarship across Institutional Levels (N=236)

Institutional Level	How much emphasis	Scholarship of Discovery	Scholarship of Integration	Scholarship of Application	Scholarship of Teaching
University	Most	75.80%	22.82%	24.66%	28.86%
	Somewhat	17.20%	51.01%	48.63%	51.68%
	Not	5.73%	22.82%	23.97%	14.09%
	Discouraged	1.27%	3.36%	2.74%	5.37%
College	Most	82.72%	24.00%	28.95%	25.32%
	Somewhat	11.73%	46.00%	48.68%	52.60%
	Not	3.70%	27.33%	17.76%	16.88%
	Discouraged	1.85%	2.67%	4.61%	5.19%
Dept./School	Most	84.90%	21.50%	25.80%	28.50%
	Somewhat	11.30%	47.40%	49.00%	47.70%
	Not	2.50%	26.20%	22.60%	20.50%
	Discouraged	1.30%	4.70%	2.60%	3.30%
Colleagues	Most	79.87%	16.55%	29.73%	27.21%
	Somewhat	12.99%	51.72%	41.22%	48.30%
	Not	5.84%	26.90%	24.32%	19.73%
	Discouraged	1.30%	4.83%	4.73%	4.76%

Table 2.

*Perceived Impact of SoTL on Various Means toward Career Advancement (*n*=117)*

	Very Negatively	Negatively	Neither Negatively nor Positively	Positively	Very Positively
P & T*	0.85%	5.98%	22.22%	46.15%	11.11%
Salary/Merit	12.28%	0.00%	48.25%	33.33%	6.14%
Viewed by Leadership	1.71%	9.40%	23.93%	50.43%	14.53%
Viewed by Colleagues	0.00%	10.34%	37.07%	43.97%	8.62%

*13.68% selected "Not applicable" due to being contract faculty