

Preliminary Results: Exploring Teaching & Learning Research Institutes at Research-Intensive Universities

Study Rationale

Since the 1970s, interdisciplinary research institutes have become increasingly common at institutions of higher education, and particularly at those with strong research mandates. Despite posing some unique organizational challenges, such institutes have been championed for their capacity to encourage research collaboration across disciplinary boundaries and thus to contribute to the development of knowledge about complex problems that would benefit from an interdisciplinary approach (Bozeman & Boardman, 2003; Bunton & Mallon, 2007).

The challenge of enhancing student learning in higher education is one such complex problem, and thus it is perhaps not surprising that teaching and learning scholars have recently suggested that the field would benefit from more collaborative and interdisciplinary work (Gale, 2007; McKinney, 2013), and from the kinds of central institutional embedding that research institutes can provide (Poole, Taylor, & Thompson, 2007). A number of organized, interdisciplinary units focused on teaching and learning scholarship have sprung up at universities and colleges, but systematically gathered information about best practices for developing and running this kind of institute is nonetheless scant.

This report provides a brief summary of a research project that attempted to fill this gap by gathering qualitative and quantitative data about the design, organization and outcomes of higher education scholarship institutes at research-intensive universities.

Research Questions:

1. What are the characteristics and features of existing educational scholarship institutes at research-intensive universities?
2. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of these institutes, according to institute members and directors?
3. What features of institute design do members and directors believe contribute to their institutes' successes and challenges?

Methodology & Participants

- A scan of websites for universities described as “High” or “Very High” in terms of research intensity and “Comprehensive” or “Fully Comprehensive” in terms of subject focus on the QS World University Rankings list for 2012 (<http://www.topuniversities.com/>) was completed between November 2012 and February 2013.

- In Spring 2013, an electronic survey, containing a mixture of forced-choice and open ended questions, was sent to approximately 2330 people listed as affiliated with the educational scholarship institutes located in the website scan.
- 245 people consented to participate and completed the survey in full or in part (response rate = ~11%)

Key Findings

Benefits of organized scholarship units

- Survey participants suggested that their educational scholarship institutes produce a number of positive outcomes. In response to an open-ended question about the benefits of these units, for instance, participants noted the following:
 - o Generating collaboration and community (37% of respondents)
 - o Fostering diverse, interdisciplinary connections (16% of respondents)
 - o Providing members access to valued resources, such as funding, administrative support, & professional development opportunities (31% of respondents)
 - o Exerting a perceived positive impact on teaching (16% of respondents) and/or on learning (6% of respondents)

Challenges of organized scholarship units

- Participants also described (in response to an open-ended question) a number of shortcomings they believe attach to the educational scholarship institutes with which they are affiliated. These included:
 - o Insufficient resources (34% of respondents)
 - o Institutional undervaluing of the scholarship produced (30% of respondents)
 - o Insufficient time for members to participate effectively (9% of respondents)

Key design features

- Survey respondents suggested that a number of activities and services are relatively common features of the educational scholarship institutes studied. Elements which were most frequently marked as 'offered' on a forced-choice question included:
 - o regular meetings with other institute members (selected by 85% of respondents)
 - o workshops or courses on topics in teaching and learning research (83%)
 - o consultation with knowledgeable research personnel (81%)
 - o on-campus conferences/symposia (80%)
 - o publicity for research activities via a campus newsletter/bulletin (80%)
- Participants were also asked to rate the importance of these features to their institutes' successes. Elements most commonly identified as 'very important' by participants who suggested their units offered the relevant feature included:
 - o literature resources (62% of respondents who indicated these were available through their institutes)
 - o grants for research (57%)

- physical space for research (56%)
- consultation with knowledgeable personnel (53%)
- regular meetings with other institute members (51%)

Next Steps

- A conference paper describing this study in greater detail is in preparation and will be presented at the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (ISSOTL) conference in October 2013.
- A report, which synthesizes the results of this project along with insights from the literature, has been developed to inform the development of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning institute at McMaster University.

References

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