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A Faculty Learning Community's Yearlong Journey

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Abstract

Over the past twenty years, the term "student engagement" has become a primary means for orienting faculty and administrators around pedagogic improvements and curriculum development. The increasing prevalence of technology in educational settings and the ways it alters more traditional classroom formats, student-teacher interactions, and research methods suggest that engagement may now look and function differently than in the past. This article describes the reflective journey of a yearlong Faculty Learning Community (FLC) at a private, urban Jesuit university on the topic of student engagement. It investigates and debates current thinking on the topic, assesses methods of measurement, and shares project results. Attending to the relationships between teacher, learner, and content may improve the scholarship, practice, and effects of teaching within the powerful and competing demands of the real world.

Over the past twenty years, the term "student engagement" has become a primary means for orienting faculty and administrators around pedagogic improvements and curriculum development. The increasing prevalence of technology in educational settings and the ways it alters more traditional classroom formats, student-teacher interactions, and research methods, suggest that engagement may now look and function differently than in the past. However, there remains serious disagreement about the value of student engagement within learning contexts, and how it might best be defined and measured. To these questions, this article describes the journey of a yearlong Faculty Learning Community (FLC) at a private, urban Jesuit university on the topic of student engagement. It investigates and debates current thinking on the topic, assesses methods used for measurement and shares project results. Based on findings, this paper argues for an increased awareness of the complexities involved in defining, measuring, assessing and improving student engagement and ultimately learning in twenty-first century classrooms.

Scholarship in the Jesuit Tradition

At a Jesuit university, faculty consider student engagement within the context of Ignatian pedagogy. Inspired by St. Ignatius, this teaching method whereby faculty care for the individual student (*cura personalis*) calls attention to not only academic learning but also to personal, holistic growth. Jesuit education "consistently maintains the importance and integrity of the interrelationship of teacher, learner and subject matter within the real context in which they live."[1]

The Ignatian pedagogical model for teaching presupposes the dynamic interrelationship between three concepts: reflection, experience, and action. In this approach, "teachers provide imaginative and engaging opportunities for pupils to try out new skills, to use new knowledge, to exercise new ways of expressing themselves, their beliefs, values and questions. Through action, rooted in reflection on experience, pupils begin to develop a truthful and coherent vision of the world and their place in it."[2]

Ignatian pedagogy, then, suggests that the most successful approaches to student engagement generate a transformation of the students' thinking achieved by this relationship between the teacher and learner. James, Martinez, and Herbers suggest a new paradigm for learning, which "requires active participation from the student, a collaborative relationship between students and teachers, and joint responsibility for learning."[3] Understanding how faculty engage students "to become men and women for others," as declared in the university's mission statement, is a key to understanding student engagement within the Jesuit educational mission. Further, considering this perspective within a twenty-first century context is also necessary for interpreting if and how it is achieved. In an effort to explore student engagement in this Jesuit tradition and in today's learning environment, FLC members embarked on an active, collaborative, yearlong investigation into ways to enhance teaching and learning.

Purpose of Faculty Learning Communities

FLCs fall under the broader category of a "Community of Practice" (CoP), simply defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."[4] CoPs comprise three distinct characteristics: a domain of shared identity (such as faculty), who come together to learn with and from each other in a community (such as in a university setting), for the purpose of developing expertise in practice (such as teaching).[5] An FLC, also called a "professional learning community," is one type of CoP and has been referred to as a "cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group of six to fifteen members who meet with frequent seminars and activities to provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building."[6] Examples of FLCs include, but are not limited to, those formed by faculty from one discipline who teach a subject matter at a common university for the sole purpose of improving a specific course;[7] inter-university endeavors for faculty of a shared discipline to develop professionally;[8] and multi-disciplined communities from the same university tackling pedagogical innovations such as the use of technology in classrooms.[9] Incorporating dialogue in a social setting, FLCs provide a medium for faculty to learn and reflect with

colleagues, often to accomplish a specific goal, which generally includes some aspect of enhanced student learning. While some FLCs include online forums and can last for years, more commonly faculty attend regularly set, in-person meetings throughout an academic year in an environment conducive to collaborative learning. Members are expected to function by consensus rather than majority, developing a culture of openness and trust in order to agree upon and achieve learning outcomes.

The Student Engagement FLC addressed in this paper convened seven faculty from one university across all ranks and disciplines for twice monthly meetings during the course of an academic year to address the complex topic of "Student Engagement in the Classroom: Best Practices." The initial call for voluntary applications resulted in a diverse cohort of faculty from the schools of Arts and Sciences, Business, and Nursing and Health Professions. The group consisted of junior, mid-career, and senior faculty members holding ranks ranging from tenure-track to term to adjunct. The diversity of this self-selecting group in many ways mirrors the multiple perspectives found within the university's student population. FLC participants drew on a range of viewpoints to investigate, define, and assess student engagement with the goal of improving teaching and enhancing student learning across the university's many schools and student groups. Members participated in activities that afforded learning, pedagogic development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and community building. However, the first charge of the FLC community was to define student engagement within the university context. This inquiry led to the following questions that guided the work: 1) how is student engagement discursively defined? 2) what does student engagement at an urban Jesuit university look like, and how is it practiced in the classroom? 3) where and how is student engagement examined and measured? 4) what techniques and methods best advance student engagement? and 5) will new knowledge acquired over the year-long endeavor shift FLC members' thinking?

Defining Student Engagement: Toward a Local Perspective

The FLC began work by searching the literature for expert opinion, scholarly readings, and research on student engagement. After iterative reading, the group discussed several definitions of student engagement. Elizabeth Barkley and Nick Zepke, scholars in the field of student engagement, offer comprehensive, insightful, and critical definitions of student engagement. Barkley in *Student Engagement Techniques* defines student engagement "as a process and a product that is experienced on a continuum and results from the synergistic interaction between motivation and active learning."[10] Zepke in "Student Engagement Research in Higher Education: Questioning an Academic Orthodoxy" recommends consideration of the "behavioral, emotional and cognitive characteristics of engagement" and the fusion of these engagement characteristics with "multiple facilitators of engagement" to offer "a useful framework for thinking about student engagement."[11]

The definitions offered by Barkley and Zepke deepen more common understandings of student engagement, colloquially defined to simply mean "being interested." Synergizing motivation and active learning, Barkley states that *interest* is only pedagogically productive when it translates into motivated learning. Zepke acknowledges that the nature of the term student engagement is all too deceptive, idealized, and generic. Only by paying attention to the interdependent relationships between behavior, emotion, and cognition can a more complete and in-depth picture of student engagement be acquired. On the basis of this more comprehensive model, one can discern various domains of student engagement: in the classroom, on campus, in the city, in one's profession, and in the world. Engagement in the classroom is often influenced by factors outside the teacher's control.[12]

Zepke's critical outlook allows one to zoom out from narrow singular preoccupations with student engagement to instead focus on the political and economic factors underpinning the recent surge of interest in student engagement and its consequences. Zepke critically argues that the current increased emphasis on student

engagement may (1) neglect specific contexts when aiming at a generally engaged student, (2) flourish at the expense of curriculum, and (3) fit a certain neoliberal framework that takes a more instrumental view of knowledge. This raises the concern that if student engagement is approached and measured simply as part of a data-driven curricular development, an instructor's ability to develop curriculum may be negatively impacted. This type of data-driven environment may be detrimental to the ability of faculty to engage in the creative and intellectual risk-taking that is believed to spark a student's intellectual curiosity.

The Student Engagement FLC then set out to understand and apply these perspectives on student engagement to each member's actual classroom teaching experiences. The process involved asking and attempting to answer questions throughout a multi-step process. The group employed innovative methods for sharing and evaluation that included compiling and coding successful assignments targeted to different learning styles and academic disciplines, real-time self-assessment of teaching moments in current courses, designing a facilitated forum for eliciting student-oriented perspectives, and a discussion with scholar and researcher Nick Zepke. Each of the steps helped refine and focus the FLC's inquiry on the various milieus that influence student engagement and its consequent exploration of these milieus in the context of the particularities of the university setting. While the steps toward a similar investigation on student engagement might differ from institution to institution, the trajectory of asking and evaluating at each step may offer methodological guidance to other institutions.

Overall, based on research and lengthy discussion, the FLC's perspective is that a student-oriented approach to student engagement must be combined with an "ecological" (milieu-centered) approach. In this way, students' "own" understandings of their engagement are in dialogue with faculty teaching methods, allowing all parties to speak to the breadth and depth of their experiences within the university locale. Clearly, administrative voices are also an integral part of this conversation. Thus, a more critical and contextual stance on student engagement is warranted. Considerations of student engagement

need to move from the current narrow focus in the classroom and data-driven curricular development to a broader examination that includes a sensitivity to the different factors across milieus that may influence engagement. These include political, institutional, familial, economic, and campus culture influences, which change depending on who is involved in the conversation — administrators, teachers, students, and even parents. Moreover, given the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive elements of student engagement,[13] a comprehensive approach to student engagement in the classroom calls for creativity in combining multi-faceted educational techniques and teaching-learning strategies with tools for assessing and measuring outcomes.

Moving forward, the FLC's working definition of student engagement is that it consists of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement that is not generalized but rather based on context and informed by the specific locale of a given university.[14] Student engagement can only acquire practical meaning when inspected across different milieus and within the contextual background of the university's students, locale, mission, and culture of learning. Moreover, the extent of which this stimulates behavioral engagement in the form of participation in academic activities, or fosters strong emotional bonds between peers, students, and the university, or even engagement with the larger world beyond the academic setting, is uncertain and perhaps may be beyond the purview of student engagement in the classroom.

Steps to Recognize and Measure Student Engagement

To begin, the FLC studied feedback from a student engagement pilot survey conducted by a university subcommittee on teaching excellence. The pilot questionnaire asked students to describe activities that pertained to their learning and overall enjoyment both in their high school and early college courses. This research made an important contribution to the FLC's understanding of student engagement from the student perspective, but it also clarified a need to further define the learning outcomes of such activities. How could the perspectives of teachers, students, and administrators measuring the quality of education across a college experience agree and

unite around best practices, given multiple paradigms? Examining other measures of student engagement added to these questions. The group reviewed national and local faculty and student survey results such as the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), and the university exit survey for graduating seniors and student evaluation sections regarding engagement. The FLC concluded that student engagement should not be examined exclusively from the faculty or university administrative perspective, but also needed to include the voices of students directly, yet in order to do so, we need to understand how students view engagement as it relates or does not relate to learning.

The next step in the process was to embark on a course of self-study. To discern personal biases and facilitate sharing of in-class and out-of-class best practices and experiences, all members completed a self-assessment survey of several of their own courses using indicators drawn from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE).[15] Faculty each chose two courses where students seemed highly engaged, motivated, and inspired, and looked at in-class pedagogical strategies that engaged students in the learning objectives, topics, and assignments. To compare pedagogical approaches and levels of student motivation for learning, faculty chose one course for majors in their discipline and one for non-majors (a required or an elective course) to compare levels of engagement as defined on these larger surveys. Faculty rated a key assignment for each course using both a quantitative Likert scale and qualitative open-ended questions to ascertain whether personal pedagogies supported a high level of student engagement. Categories for assignment rating drawn from the NSSE included: academic challenge (higher order learning, reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, quantitative reasoning), learning with peers (collaborative, discussions with diverse others), experiences with faculty (student-faculty interaction, effective teaching practices), and campus environment (quality of interactions, supportive environment). Data were analyzed through group discussion at subsequent meetings, and common themes and best practices were noted.

Throughout the year, meeting notes, readings, recommendations, and teaching practices were documented in a collaborative online environment using a learning management system to document faculty thinking and learning. Examples of documentation included 1) classroom tools exemplars: gaming, collaborative web-based forms, jigsaw exercises, ideas for class archives, podcasts, video conferencing, and pair and share exercises; 2) blog of self-assessment of teaching techniques: incorporating peer feedback, relating readings to campus life, in-class activities, personal connections with students, and evaluating the flipped classroom; 3) feedback from mid-semester student and faculty surveys; 4) literature review research articles; 5) audio recording: interview with author Nick Zepke; and 6) materials from other relevant campus presentations, for example, on Digital Millennials. The database of resources not only informed faculty but improved the self-reflective aspect of the topic while showing how our questions were actually related to and in dialogue with other concerns on campus.

The third step was a pilot student forum designed by the FLC as a further strategy for obtaining real-time feedback on what student engagement at the university looks like from a student perspective. This pivotal two-hour-long student-faculty event was open to the entire student population. Students signed up via an e-mail call and gathered together in the central campus. The authors realize the sample size was small (n=20) and may not be representative of the student body at large; valuable insights were gained nonetheless. Students participated in icebreaker introductions, shared dinner with faculty, and discussed the meaning of student engagement in terms of their own experiences both in and outside the classroom. FLC members listened as students first spoke among themselves and then shared experiences, which we wrote on whiteboards positioned around the room. After dinner, students participated in three learning exercises and an informal discussion on the effectiveness of the activities presented by faculty to engage them. At the conclusion of the forum, students completed a confidential online survey on multiple aspects of student engagement.

The pilot survey revealed several factors influencing student engagement in the classroom

on the local campus (see Figure 1). Due to the small population of students in attendance, the results of the survey are not generalizable beyond the local campus, but they did serve the purpose of trialling a method to gain student input on student engagement. Students reported that the most important factors outside the classroom impacting their engagement in the classroom were getting adequate sleep and being prepared (or, in both cases, lack thereof). In terms of factors in the classroom, students ranked the professor's

motivation and the physical arrangement of furniture as the most significant factors. Students shared that the value of learning intensifies if professors expect students to draw on their current worldviews and apply their knowledge to real life experiences outside the classroom. In addition, students defined engagement in terms of fun, interaction, and participation, but also noted commitment and responsibility to studies as crucially important.
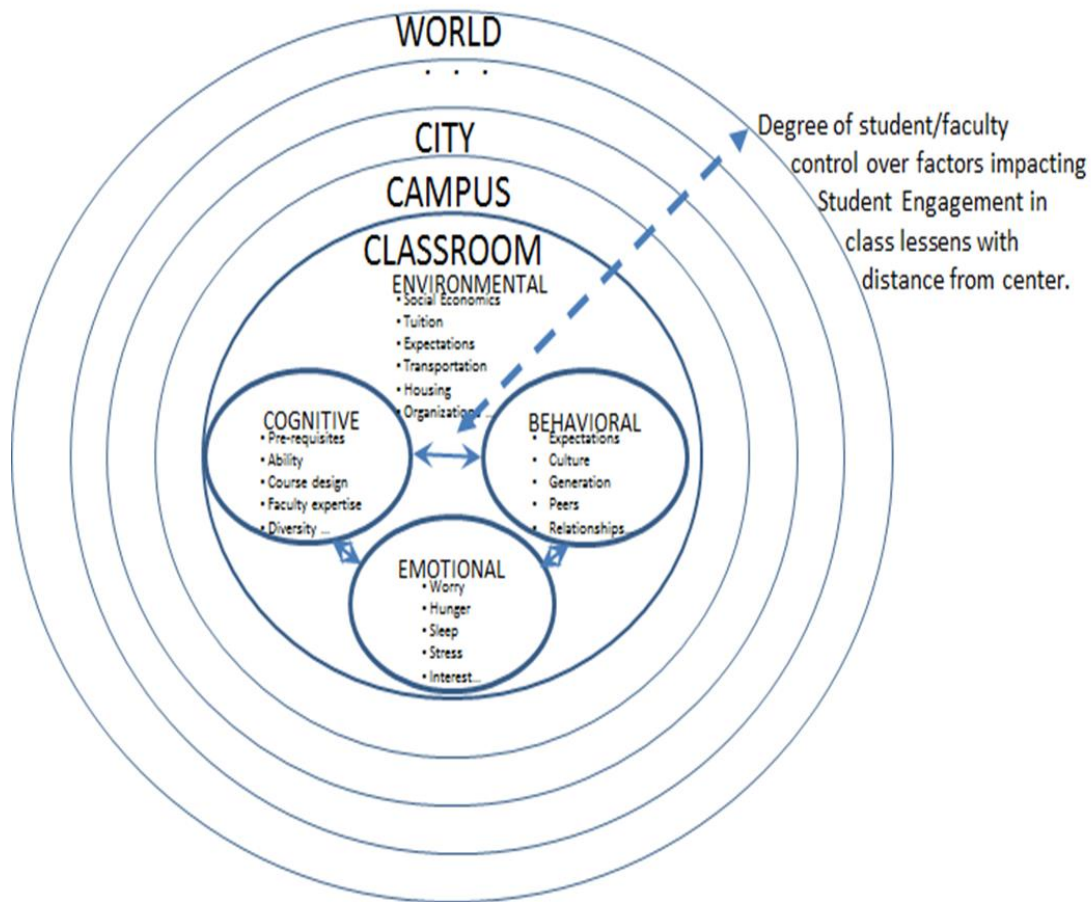
Figure 1. Factors Impacting Student Engagement in the Classroom

This figure illustrates the myriad of factors that may impact a student's engagement in the classroom identified by faculty and students. From the faculty and student perspective, the perception of control lessens within the context of the larger cultural concepts of campus, city, and world. From the faculty perspective at a Jesuit school, it is pivotal to bring the context of world, city, and campus into the classroom to educate the whole person.

The fourth and final step was to gain more knowledge regarding student engagement and how to address it on a particular campus. For this, the FLC arranged a Skype meeting with scholar Nick Zepke in New Zealand. The group sent Zepke a briefing of research and questions, and from this a rich discussion of current issues in student engagement ensued. The conversation emphasized that the multiple data measurements used to assess engagement may neglect the specific contexts that identify and define an engaged student. The discussion validated FLC thinking: student engagement should be approached holistically (and locally) by including cultural and political factors that impact cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects both in and out of the classroom. While increased emphasis on these engagement factors may initially have a cost to curriculum in terms of output — perhaps reducing the amount of work completed in the course and the amount of time faculty and students might spend with the material alone — over time such attention could impact teacher-student relations and the campus culture as a whole, and thus the kind of learning that occurs there.

Zepke's critique of the neoliberal model of education spoke strongly to the FLC as educators at a private, tuition-driven institution that relies on enrollment. The group realized that operating as part of a system that at times counters certain Jesuit ethics and principles in regard to educational processes takes time and does not have a singular route to completion or mastery. Moreover, the drive to assess student learning as a feature of pedagogical processes does not clearly align with how teachers and students might work together collaboratively to cultivate engaged classroom experiences. Zepke also reinforced the importance of including student voices in the local discussion of student engagement. He shared examples of universities (Elon University and University of Lincoln) that employ alternative, bottom-up approaches to student engagement as part of a student-driven, democratic model of learning. In these cases, students are seen as creative producers, rather than consumers of learning.[16] As a result of this four-step process, the FLC embarked on articulating recommendations for improving student engagement at the

university and recommended methods to collect, assess, and evaluate student engagement.

Recommendations for Situating Student Engagement within Ignatian Pedagogy

After discourse on the topic of student engagement, self-reflection, and review of multiple measures of student engagement at the university, the FLC developed several recommendations to improve student engagement and measurement in the classroom locally (see Table 1). The FLC then shared these findings with other faculty and administrators in a sponsored teaching cafe in the fall the following year. The project outcomes and recommendations are considered in the Jesuit model of Ignatian pedagogy (reflection, experience, action), where actions may be taken campus-wide, within specific colleges or departments, or via larger engagement with the world.

FLC members also reflected individually and collectively at the conclusion of the year-long journey on what action around student engagement might look like going forward. Each member noted shifts in thinking about student engagement practices and implications for further study. Through participation in the FLC, faculty gained tools to assess, monitor, and refine student engagement practices within their respective classrooms. Student feedback sought during the semester often productively resulted in changed content and assignments in courses underway rather than waiting for the end of the semester. Members kept track of successes and improvements of specific aspects of teaching and held others accountable to process improvement. Overall, sharing these processes helped increase communication and decrease the isolation that so often accompanies academic schedules and teaching loads.

By sharing best practice classroom tools (e.g., gaming, jigsaw exercises, and podcasts) and by blogging and self-assessing our teaching techniques, the group strengthened their own teaching while supporting each other. Reflecting on course work through blogging raised further questions and implications for further contemplation: How does our particular campus culture affect classroom learning? How are

Table 1. Recommendations to Improve Student Engagement at the Local University Level

Ignatian Pedagogy Concept	Recommendations
Reflection	• Determine through shared discussion forums with administration, faculty, and students which outcomes are appropriate to monitor, measure, and address to improve student engagement • Initiate and promote iterative student engagement discussions within each school at the university and identify local improvements specific to the discipline and context • Close the feedback loop: have faculty review current engagement indicators in the NSSE, FSSE, and local surveys to identify trends and analyze gaps in areas relevant to student engagement • Develop a forum for questioning and challenging these indicators and further understanding and application at the local university level • Evaluate the ability of current student surveys to assess the aim of Jesuit education: transformation of the student, full growth leading to action, and forming young men and women for others
Experience	• Create a faculty blog to share with successful and failed teaching strategies for student engagement • Add open-ended questions to the graduating student exit survey to obtain qualitative feedback from students • Expand survey questions to assess the intersection of learning, intellectual curiosity, and scholarly activities including but not limited to publication, conference presentation, journalism, blogging, creative work, and exhibits
Action	• Develop a "Student Engagement Toolbox" webpage for university faculty with resources to improve student engagement in the classroom • Encourage scholarship at the local level to understand and describe the factors impacting student engagement in the classroom on a particular campus • Fund future faculty work groups to promote communication (vs. isolation) and systematic experimentation, monitoring, and assessment of student engagement outcomes • Improve the graduating student exit survey by adding specific questions about the Jesuit engagement experience at the university and beyond • Design, develop, and pilot faculty/student workshops to extend and promote the discussion of student engagement beyond the survey data including short informative talks from FLC members, roundtable discussions, and tools for participants' future use • Invite student engagement experts to campus events to promote and stimulate ongoing discussion of student engagement

students affected by larger cultural, urban, and socio-political influences? How does cultural diversity inside and outside of the classroom affect student engagement? How can we as teachers holistically address cognitive, behavioral, and emotional factors underpinning student engagement?

The group noted value in reviewing indicators and feedback on university student surveys and discerned the need for improvement of university-specific questions. One finding concluded that the current graduating student exit survey, important to the university's Jesuit mission, includes a diverse range of questions but only one question about student engagement. However, engagement is a significant feature of course teaching surveys. Upon review of these surveys, given the importance of learning the effects of student engagement in the classroom, an effective exit survey should add specific questions about the engagement experience in the classroom at the university and add open-ended questions for qualitative feedback from students. Moreover, in order to receive feedback on active learning in combination with service, research and scholarly activity, it is recommended that questions regarding the intersection of learning, intellectual curiosity, and research be expanded to include not only publication and conference presentations, but journalism, blogging, creative work, and exhibits as well.

Finally, the topic of student engagement is more complex than initially thought, particularly in our current educational economy. To focus on a more comprehensive definition of student engagement, the discussion needs to be broadened beyond the outcomes of surveys such as NSSE, FSSE, student course evaluations and exit surveys. Improvement in student engagement demands intense effort to understand what student engagement truly looks like at the local university and how it can be recognized from multiple vantage points. Further study is warranted to discover, experiment with, and improve student engagement at the university level as part of a well-supported collective effort consisting of multiple disciplinary and cross-disciplinary teams of faculty. Importantly, the classroom is situated in a larger framework and thus cannot be evaluated as an isolated arena. Several factors above and beyond the local

campus culture influence student engagement. Studying the student perspective is imperative to successful student engagement. Supporting processes that assess and document communication between faculty and students, faculty and administrators, and students and administrators results in increased student engagement.

The FLC experience revealed that defining, improving and measuring student engagement requires an intensive, thoughtful, and sustained effort including strong student, faculty, and administrative involvement. Since Jesuit pedagogy is predicated on reflection to precipitate action, it is imperative to examine the real context within which students live, think, and feel. Only then can teaching the whole student result in students learning to become "women and men for others." Student engagement in the Jesuit tradition asks for an approach to teaching as an informed and thoughtful practice that happens between teachers and students, but in which administrators and educational structures also play a part. Ongoing reevaluation and adjustment is necessary, yet also takes great effort to sustain. While it may seem more efficacious to create a standard definition of an engaged student, this FLC recommends that faculty take the time to slow down and critically reflect on their own assumptions and teaching practices in terms of student engagement. Attending to the relationship between teacher, learner, and content not as given but as in question, may improve the scholarship, practice, and effects of teaching regarding engagement and ultimately enhance action within the powerful and competing demands of the real world. HJE

Notes

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