

**Promoting Community Engagement: A Campus-Wide Approach to Applied Learning**

Jacquelyn J. Lee

Paul A. Townend

Jess M. Boersma

Timothy P. Tippett

Caroline M. Clements

Robert A. Hicks

The University of North Carolina, Wilmington

Applied learning pedagogy has gained momentum in recent decades. Simultaneously, a call for universities to respond to the needs of local and global communities has prompted a focus on community engagement in higher education. The purpose of this paper is to describe the development of the Applied Learning and Teaching Community (ALTC), an initiative designed to further integrate applied learning—including community engagement—into the identity, practice, and teaching ethos of the university. With a focus on sustainability, the ALTC has evolved into an expansive model that involves faculty, staff, students, and other supporters across campus. A discussion of the ALTC's relevance in the context of current trends in higher education is included.

**Keywords:** applied learning, experiential learning, community engagement, civic engagement, high impact practices, pedagogy, interprofessional education, interdisciplinary.

The university is a vital resource for the communities it serves, and by the same token, the community offers invaluable opportunities for student engagement. A university is also a community unto itself. Rich, vibrant, and practically-effective connections across colleges, schools, and disciplines are essential if universities are to fulfill their promise as hubs of learning and centers for the exchange of ideas. When these prospects are recognized, space is created for students to apply knowledge gained in the classroom while fostering a mutually beneficial relationship between the university and community. As a high-impact pedagogical practice, applied learning pushes faculty, staff, and students towards realizing this promise by enhancing educational outcomes (Michaelsen & McCord, 2011). Interest in innovating curricula has grown alongside the development of applied learning's core concepts, and the availability of applied learning has become an expectation for educational institutions (AAC&U, 2008). Further, increased attention to experiential approaches presents an opening to promote community and civic engagement. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) identifies civic learning and democratic engagement as an "undisputed educational priority" (p. 2), asserting the university's role of service to the community good and preserving the relevance of the curriculum to societal problems. Taken together, community engagement designed with applied learning principles expands

education beyond the classroom walls and brings invaluable knowledge gained back into the academic milieu, thereby deepening the teaching and learning experience.

Institutional commitment is essential to encourage and sustain campus-wide integration of applied learning pedagogical practices (AAC&U, 2008). The development, implementation, and evaluation of community-engaged applied learning requires knowledge, skills, and resources to ensure the experiences are meaningful and reciprocally beneficial. As such, the purpose of this paper is to describe the development of the Applied Learning and Teaching Community (ALTC), an initiative designed to further integrate applied learning—including community engagement—into the identity, practice, and teaching ethos of the university. While the initiative includes other applied learning opportunities across disciplines, community engagement played a central role (e.g., service-learning, study abroad, internships, select directed independent studies, course-embedded projects, and undergraduate research efforts).

**Applied Learning Experiences**

Pedagogical practices characterized as applied learning encourage learning and growth through a "reflective, experiential process" (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 25). Applied learning grew out of a long history of teaching and learning scholarship that includes terms such as experiential, active, collaborative, and cooperative learning. Ash and Clayton (2009) emphasize the active, engaged, and collaborative nature of applied learning pedagogies and suggest they offer

students the opportunity to “connect theory and practice, to learn in unfamiliar contexts, to interact with others unlike themselves, and to practice using knowledge and skills” (p. 25). Similarly, the AAC&U (2009a) emphasizes the hands-on nature of applied learning and extends the concept to include *integrated learning*. The AAC&U defines applied and integrated learning as “an understanding and disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus” (AAC&U, 2009a, para. 2). As such, examples of applied learning can include fieldwork, service-learning, study abroad programs, and simulations of tasks that students may face in the employment setting.

Akin to applied learning, experiential learning can be understood as “a process whereby the learner interacts with the world and integrates new learning into old constructs” (Eyler, 2009, p. 1). Through active participation, the learner integrates course content with practical skills and critical reflection. The experiential approach contrasts with traditional approaches to education, which position the student as a passive recipient of knowledge (O’Connor, Lynch, & Owen, 2011). Successfully executed efforts to include experiential learning in curricula transform students from consumers to co-producers of knowledge (O’Connor et al., 2011). For this reason, efforts to incorporate experiential approaches to curricula have, at times, been met with difficulty due to lack of institutional support and resistance from faculty who favor a more traditional approach to teaching (Austin & Rust, 2015).

The AAC&U (2009a) asserts, “Fostering students’ abilities to integrate learning—across courses, over time, and between campus and community life—is one of the most important goals and challenges for higher education” (para. 3). Indeed, preparing students to address complex social and global problems creatively and proactively requires such integrative experiences—ones that intentionally incorporate multiple areas of knowledge and modes of inquiry, offer multiple solutions, and illustrate the necessity of multiple perspectives (AAC&U, 2009a). However, just *how* to cultivate meaningful experiential opportunities is less defined. Advocating for eight principles for experiential education,

The National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) (2013) posits students should begin with a clear intention about engagement in experiential learning, become prepared and involved in planning, and experience an authentic applied context. Reflection throughout and after the experience is thought to be critical, and orientation and training should be considered when necessary (NSEE, 2013). NSEE encourages facilitators to monitor the experience for continued improvement, engage in assessment and evaluation, and acknowledge the impact and accomplishments of learning throughout and concluding the process.

### **Community Engagement as a High Impact Applied Learning Experience**

Community engagement is an important component of larger efforts to include experiential learning in curricula (Fitzgerald, 2012) and serves as a means of restoring “the traditional civic role of the university” (O’Connor et al., 2011, p. 100). Fitzgerald (2012) defines community engagement as “a university’s active role in supporting a mutually beneficial relationship with on- and off-campus community partners” (p. 101). Community engagement may include concrete initiatives such as workshops or abstract goals such as creation of partnerships (Rubin, 2000). Community-engaged experiential learning allows students to take the lead in forming meaningful connections between schoolwork and real-world problems (Perry & Katula, 2001). The merger of experiential learning and community engagement results in stronger academic performance and increased knowledge retention as compared to traditional teaching methods (Astin & Sax, 1998; Coakley & Sousa, 2013).

Further, community-engaged experiential learning fosters a sense of civic responsibility among students and contributes to the production of well-rounded graduates (O’Connor et al., 2011). Experiential learning curricula that include community engagement build bridges between the campus and larger community by maintaining accountability of the university through interaction between researchers and community stakeholders (O’Connor et al., 2011). In a study involving 3,450 students from 42 undergraduate institutions, Astin and Sax (1998) found that community engagement “substantially enhances student’s academic development, life skill development, and sense of civic responsibility” (p. 251). In a review of 37

empirical studies of community engagement, including service programs such as AmeriCorps and college-based service programs, Perry and Katula (2001) concluded that community engagement improves citizenship-related cognitive understanding and predicts future volunteerism. Consequently, the integration of community engagement in higher education has significant positive impacts on student learning, the university campus, and the broader community. Importantly, Campus Compact (2010) identifies specific ways in which institutions may build infrastructure to both create and sustain community-campus relationships. The organization underscores the need to address the logistical and technical supports needed for curricular and co-curricular civic engagement activities as well as coordination by a network or advisory group focused on long-term partnerships. Evaluation tools are needed to examine impact, and “structures that support seamless collaboration between curricular and co-curricular initiatives” would strengthen community engagement efforts (Campus Compact, 2010, p. 19).

Instating programs for applied learning and experiential education is challenging for many universities (Austin & Rust, 2015). Although many universities include community engagement in their mission statements, these efforts often lack structures for coordination and accountability (Fitzgerald, 2012). As a result, duplication of university efforts to incorporate community engagement can arise, and opportunities for interdisciplinary projects may be missed. Another common conflict is how to balance traditional and non-traditional learning in a curriculum. “Traditionalists” view the educational process as occurring in a classroom, with a certain amount of time to cover a certain amount of material (Fitzgerald, 2012). Experiential projects, however, require time for planning and execution, but also funding. Encouraging multidisciplinary and creating incentives for faculty participation have been suggested methods of prioritizing community engagement and experiential learning (Fitzgerald, 2012). In recent years, institutions have responded by developing infrastructures that include the creation of teams for coordination of community engagement efforts across campus, monitoring budgets, and overseeing projects (Fitzgerald, 2012).

### **A Campus-Wide Initiative for Applied Learning**

A campus-wide initiative, the Applied Learning and Teaching Community (ALTC) was developed as one of three components of the University of North Carolina Wilmington’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for the reaffirmation process outlined by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The QEP, entitled ETEAL: *Experiencing Transformative Education through Applied Learning*, was designed to positively impact student learning by integrating, enhancing, and resourcing applied learning efforts across campus. Focused on three learning outcomes (see Table 1), ETEAL was comprised of three components: (a) pedagogy initiatives to fund faculty or staff projects, (b) the Applied Learning Summer Institute to encourage professional development, and (c) the Applied Learning and Teaching Community, open to all faculty, staff, and students. While the ALTC is a component of the QEP, it is noteworthy that the initiative was designed to exist beyond the timeframe of the QEP. While applied learning has at times been used interchangeably with other terms, the depth of the AAC&U’s conceptualization of it, as well as the availability of aligned assessment tools, resulted in the decision to choose applied learning (versus experiential learning) as the topic for the QEP (AAC&U, 2009a).

### **Institutional Context**

A broad view of the larger context of the QEP and the institutional mission helps to contextualize the ALTC and underscore the degree to which its establishment was rooted in an evolving and conscious institutional commitment to applied learning. A 3/3 teaching load and the small number of graduate programs led many faculty to seek to integrate research and teaching as well as involve undergraduates in the practical aspects of their research. In 2007, the term “applied learning” came into common use at UNCW when the College of Arts and Sciences developed a requirement for all degree programs to adopt a defined applied experience as a graduation requirement for students. This decision was informed by AAC&U’s framework presented in the *College Learning for the New Global Century* report (2007), which underscored the importance of students’ capacity to apply learning to address complex problems. Subsequently, comprehensive general education reform deepened UNCW’s commitment to applied learning as the entire faculty adopted

*Explorations Beyond the Classroom* as a required component of general education at UNCW. Meanwhile, UNCW's professional schools and programs, already experienced practitioners of applied learning and rooted in community engagement, were growing rapidly, particularly the College of Health and Human Services, established formally in 2010.

Despite this rapid development of practice and formal requirements, no systematic, university-wide effort had been deployed to "either capture evidence of student learning through applied experiences or to provide appropriate professional development support for faculty and staff instructors interested in offering applied learning experiences" (UNCW, 2013, p. 4). The formal support for applied learning pedagogy developed as UNCW prepared a quality enhancement plan with required, dedicated resources as part of our 2012-13 SACS accreditation process. The QEP, as developed by a broad and representative committee, decided on enhancing applied learning as a particular focus, which resulted in a Fall 2012 pilot, and active implementation by 2013. The QEP was designed to focus intentionally on improving the availability and quality of applied learning with attention to enhancement of existing opportunities, assessment, pedagogical training, and instructor support. Further, the development of the ALTC was informed by an interest in addressing pedagogical and practical challenges associated with implementation of applied learning. Challenges such as the low student-to-faculty ratio, funding required to support certain learning experiences, and faculty development necessitated by applied learning were considered during the planning process (UNCW, 2011). The ALTC was designed to be a mechanism to shape the culture of the institution through collaboration and innovation.

#### **The Practices and Processes of the Applied Learning and Teaching Community**

The ALTC has grown in the past five years into a self-sustaining teaching and learning community of faculty, staff, students, and others interested in promoting applied learning pedagogy and scholarship (Lee et al., 2014). With a shared vision of quality learning experiences, the ALTC encourages the sharing and adoption of best practices by faculty and staff across all academic and nonacademic campus units.

Designed to sustain applied learning across campus, the ALTC offers a supportive space in which members can learn more about applied learning pedagogy, experience mentorship, access and advocate for resources, and, most importantly, connect with energized, invested instructors, staff, and scholars. Activities of the ALTC include:

- decision-making regarding topical focus of workshops, events, and special projects;
- sponsoring or co-sponsoring workshops, events (e.g., end of the year celebration), and special projects (e.g., scholarship of teaching and learning efforts);
- providing one-on-one or group consultation to support the development and implementation of current or future ETEAL-funded applied learning projects;
- participating in assessment of applied learning;
- supporting the ETEAL applied learning Summer Institute planning process;
- providing applied learning resources and best practice models; and
- producing a newsletter each semester.

The notion of community-building continues to serve as the core value of the ALTC, as sustainability of applied learning opportunities is considered essential to ensure that it is permanently woven into the fabric of the university culture. In fact, 85.6% of UNCW faculty/staff members who received funding through ETEAL report using NSEE's eight principles "considerably" or "a great deal" 1-2.5 years post-funding (UNCW 2016a, UNCW, 2017c). Further, the approach used by the ALTC is consistent with the literature, demonstrating the five key characteristics thought to be necessary for successful professional learning communities: (a) shared values and vision; (b) collective responsibility; (c) reflective professional inquiry; (d) collaboration; and (e) the occurrence of group, as well as individual, learning (Hord, 2004; Louis et al., 1995; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

#### **Model of Inclusion**

The ALTC embraces synergy in a wide variety of applied learning experiences across all campus units (see Figure 1). With bi-weekly meetings throughout the semester, the ALTC core team includes an interdisciplinary group of assistant, associate, and full professors as well as graduate students who collaboratively oversee the day-to-day operations, planning, and logistics of the aforementioned ALTC activities. Through an application process,

two faculty fellows are selected each semester to serve as primary leads in moving the ALTC's plans forward. Faculty fellows typically bring specific expertise or interests, which helps guide their additional personal contributions (e.g., an interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning may lead to a particular workshop on the topic). Fellows are compensated with a stipend or course release (pending departmental approval) and mentor graduate students throughout their involvement in various projects (e.g., newsletter, research projects, etc.). Valuing interdisciplinary collaboration, the ALTC model for inclusion has resulted in the involvement of faculty fellows and associates who represent units across campus, including Information Technology Services,

the Office of e-Learning and Randall Library; as well as many disciplines including English, Spanish, Social Work, Psychology, Educational Leadership, Criminology and Sociology, Chemistry, History, Nursing, Philosophy and Religion, Biology and Marine Biology, Communication Studies, and Math and Statistics, with new departments and units included every semester. The role of the ALTC associates includes working on a designated project(s) and/or contributing to ongoing ALTC efforts (e.g., interviewing for new Faculty Fellows). The directors of ETEAL and the Center for Teaching Excellence/Center for Faculty Leadership contribute with regular participation in the planning processes.

Table 1

*Experiencing Transformative Education Through Applied Learning Outcomes and Assessment Plan*

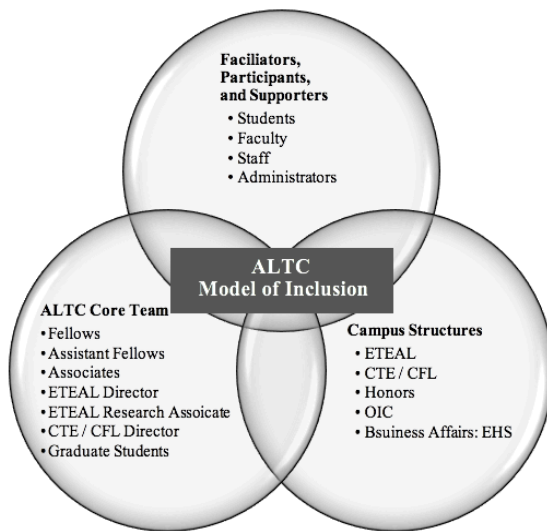
Learning Outcomes	Assessment
<p><b>1. Intention:</b> Students will articulate their expectations, the purpose, and/or the goals of the experience in terms of their personal educational development.</p> <p><b>2. Application of Knowledge:</b> Students will synthesize knowledge drawn from their coursework to address the issues/challenges/questions involved in the experience.</p> <p><b>3. Critical Reflection:</b> Students will communicate the impact or significance on their personal educational development and on others in the profession or in the field at the conclusion of the experience.</p>	<p><b>Work products:</b> Two student reflective writing products are required for all ETEAL-supported projects:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Intention reflection.</li> <li>2. Final reflection.</li> </ol> <p><b>Process:</b> Faculty evaluators score anonymous student work following a norming session.</p> <p><b>Measurement Tool:</b> Learning outcome level of achievement determined in accordance with modified AAC&amp;U VALUE Rubric (AAC&amp;U, 2009a).</p>

The ALTC actively collaborates with the ETEAL Advisory Board composed of faculty and staff across campus with an interest in applied learning. The Center for Teaching Excellence & Center for Faculty Leadership; the Honors College; the Office of Innovation and Commercialization; and Business Affairs' Environmental Health and Safety are among the growing list of collaborative units on campus. Partnerships with these groups help to leverage resources (e.g., funding) or expertise (e.g., access to entrepreneurs) to facilitate applied learning or co-sponsor events and activities. Notably, the model for inclusion of individuals and groups across campus is evolving in service of cultivating a strong sense of sustainability, as was its primary goal.

Applied learning activities in and outside of the classroom are valued equally. The encouragement of applied learning in spaces

outside of the classroom experience uniquely produces an applied learning culture across campus. Led by a non-academic unit, a successful example of applied learning outside of the classroom is the robust certified internship program designed by staff of the Career Center. In this program, students may seek out internship experiences that fall within or beyond the scope of the traditional model of earning academic credit. As a result of ETEAL and ALTC interactions, the Career Center has developed a Certified Internship Program working with and without academic units to increase the number of student internships. The program's integrity and commitment to quality of applied learning experiences greatly benefits students, and internship placements have increased 54.8% percent since the 2013-14 Academic Year at the Career Center as a result (UNCW, 2017a).

Figure 1  
 The Models of Inclusion as Practiced by the ALTC



**Model of Sustainability**

The model of sustainability used is anchored by seven interacting principles that strategically guide ALTC activities to ensure a sustainable presence at UNCW (see Figure 2).

**Collaboration and shared leadership/governance.** Collaboration, as well as shared leadership and governance, guide the structure and operations as well as contribute to overall aim of sustainability. Indeed, the impetus for the proposal of the ALTC arose from faculty investment in teaching and the culture of the institution.

Figure 2  
 The Models of Sustainability as practiced by the ALTC



The collaborative processes governing the core team and the larger group of participants reflect the interdisciplinary approach encouraged for newly proposed applied learning opportunities. Further, interprofessional education, a growing trend in higher education (Reeves et al., 2016), necessitates not only applied learning but also interprofessional engagement in various levels of university practice. Further, a commitment to collaboration is exercised through the solicitation of feedback, formally and informally, via various mechanisms including feedback forms at events,

discussions at the applied learning Summer Institute, and counsel offered by the ETEAL Advisory Board.

Assessment of the annual Applied Learning Summer Institute has shown that attendees regularly report a greater understanding of the applied learning projects and opportunities across campus, the ways in which faculty and staff can collaborate in applied learning, and a better understanding of how to get funding to support their applied learning initiatives (Hicks, 2014; Hicks, 2015; Hicks 2016a; Hicks 2017). Through intentional design, the ALTC coordination of workshops, applied learning activities and keynote speakers over the past four Summer Institutes have provided a total of over 61 hours of professional development and training for over 335 UNCW faculty and staff (UNCW, 2016b, 2017b).

**Investment in innovation and professional development.** The ALTC demonstrates investment in innovation and professional development by offering pedagogy workshops, events, graduate student support, and consultation for prospective and current facilitators of applied learning experiences for students. The aforementioned collaboration builds energy for moving forward and sustains continued interest in innovative pedagogical strategies and programming.

A document similarity analysis of Applied Learning best practices resources provided by ETEAL and course syllabi across UNCW revealed an increase of 18.6% in similarity between course syllabi and applied learning development materials and resources between 2012 and 2016 (Lantz et al., 2017). Additionally, a Spring 2016 survey of previously funded instructors, all of whom were supported by the ALTC during the development and implementation of their applied learning projects, revealed that instructors continued to use the best practices they employed in their applied learning experiences – from 74.4% who continue to use Acknowledgement practices to 95.4% who reported still using the Preparedness & Planning practices described in the NSEE's Principles of Good Practice in Experiential Education (UNCW, 2017c).

**Collaborative, concurrent layered mentorship.** The ALTC was conceived of as a “snowball,” where highly motivated professors and staff using applied learning in very diverse ways could model their practice for others and problem-solve with

novices in the field. As such, a collaborative, concurrent layered mentoring approach is used and serves as a unique model. In the core team, assistant professors are mentored by senior faculty while simultaneously mentoring graduate students—a process that makes space for all to contribute unique strengths, skills, and knowledge learning alongside each other. While being mentored, graduate students are not simply learning about applied learning pedagogy but concurrently practicing it through engaging in research, creating materials related to applied learning (e.g., newsletter), event planning and facilitating, and working within an invested group of faculty and staff. Mentorship occurs in the larger ALTC as all members work collaboratively to brainstorm, problem-solve, and share insights related to applied learning projects. The hierarchical layers of academic rank and experience with applied learning is helpful in the process, but the superordinate collaborative nature of the ALTC prevents this dynamic from being a hindrance and instead enables synergy. Further, the layered mentoring process made possible through this initiative has contributed to scholarship focused on improving the training and mentoring of Graduate Assistants (e.g., Parker, Ashe, Boersma, Hicks, & Bennett, 2015) as well as the more direct mentoring of graduate students in the production of scholarly knowledge.

**Diversity and inclusion.** Given the focus on developing cohesion, the ALTC operationalizes its commitment to diversity and inclusion by actively engaging with faculty, staff, and students from across all academic and nonacademic units. The faculty fellow roles rotate and include representation from across campus. Applied learning projects often designed with an interdisciplinary focus, and interprofessional collaborations are often generated. Further, the content of events sponsored by the ALTC represents commitment to diversity and inclusion. For example, a recent workshop encouraged and highlighted projects relating to social justice. As larger discussions arise on campus regarding diversity and community engagement, the ALTC is involved. Out of a total of 266 submitted proposals between Fall 2013 and Fall 2017, more than 52 were interdisciplinary, with 36 of those receiving full funding support (UNCW, 2017d). To date, the ALTC has supported applied learning projects in all but one of UNCW's academic departments,

and many interdisciplinary proposals include non-academic offices such as Environmental Health & Safety, the Career Center, UNCW's student counseling office, and many others.

**Engagement in assessment and scholarship.** The institutional need for assessment data related to learning outcomes aligns with the work of the ALTC, which regularly engages in collaborative assessment efforts with ETEAL and the general education assessment unit on campus to provide formal assessment of applied learning experiences. The importance of assessment is also evident in ETEAL-funded initiative proposal criteria, as intention and reflection prompts are included as requirements (see Table 1). Data are collected not only through applied learning projects, but also through assessment of activities such as workshops and the Applied Learning Summer Institute. Follow-up evaluation tools for faculty are in the development stages. Further, the scholarship of teaching and learning is of interest to the ALTC, as faculty are working to publish and present on both applied learning projects and processes used. Workshops on engaging students in scholarship have been offered, and the inclusion of undergraduate and graduate students in research projects is encouraged.

**Attention to university context.** Both the existence and efforts of the ALTC are informed by context of the University, which includes a mission that prioritizes the "integration of teaching and mentoring with research and service" and communicates a focus on student engagement (UNCW, 2016c). ETEAL, and by extension the ALTC, has explicitly identified three of the eight University learning goals as applicable to applied learning efforts. These include (a) the pursuit of rigorous, open-minded, and imaginative inquiry, (b) the integration of multiple methods and perspectives to critically examine complex problems, and (c) effective expression of meaningful ideas in speech and writing (UNCW, n.d.). Further, community-engaged applied learning experiences promote an additional university learning goal, global citizenship, which aims at developing students' capacity to describe and examine the intellectual and ethical responsibilities of active global citizenship (UNCW, n.d.). Achievement of this goal can take shape through civic-minded curricular and/or co-curricular pursuits, including but not limited to service-learning, community-

engaged applied learning projects, study abroad, or internships.

An interesting finding from many of the early workshops was that often faculty were already doing applied learning in the classroom without labeling it as such. Many of these faculty were resistant to investing in a new pedagogic process and were delighted to learn they were already engaged in the practice. To be responsive to the presence of applied learning already existent on campus, the ALTC worked to offer workshops focused on the improvement of learning experiences. For example, faculty were taught to incorporate intention and reflection assessments into their teaching so their efforts could be measured, which resulted in the tangible effect of applied learning on student knowledge acquisition.

**Responsive structure and functioning.** Aiming to intentionally respond to the needs that arise within the university, the ALTC remains fluid and evolving—both in structure and function. For example, one of the two fellow roles now span two semesters to provide consistency from the previous semester's efforts, a change in structure that has enabled the ALTC to be more efficient and effective. The role of associate fellow is now included to offer participation opportunities to those interested in working on projects with a narrow scope and/or who are interested but unable to commit to the full set of leadership responsibilities of the lead fellow role. The growth in current fellows and associates who have stayed on (unpaid) for years has meant the core team has grown considerably—at times to more than 15 faculty and staff in a semester. Increased capacity has generated the need for increasingly complex communication networks. As a result, faculty fellows now directly mentor one or more graduate students versus the previous model in which graduate students worked more consistently with every member of the entire group.

Insufficient data exists at present to adequately evaluate the effectiveness of structural changes and adaptations. However, the 5<sup>th</sup> year of UNCW's Quality Enhancement Plan is drawing to a close, and at the conclusion of that year, 5 years' worth of instructor reflections and survey responses will be available. These data can then be used to further examine the impact of the Applied Learning Teaching Community's ongoing work and continuous improvement.



### **ALTC and Community Engagement**

The aforementioned approaches and practices contribute directly to the quality of community-engaged applied learning efforts across campus. The ALTC serves as a support system for the many forms of community engagement such as course-embedded community-oriented projects, service-learning, field experiences, internships, and other civically-engaged efforts across campus. Demonstrating this commitment, the ALTC has offered workshops on topics such as: securing internal funding for community-engaged applied learning projects and challenges and solutions in managing community-engaged projects, as well as assessment and scholarship. In fact, increased collaboration with other departments or community partners and substantial positive impact for the community partners/non-profits are two of the most frequently cited outcomes by faculty (Hicks, 2016b). Additionally, smaller community-engaged projects have resulted in larger, externally-funded projects as well as scholarship. As such, support through the ALTC is a helpful way to nurture and develop a pilot project into larger grant initiatives and ultimately increased university funding.

Using a grounded theory approach, the qualitative coding of 33 written instructor reflections revealed that those faculty who received applied learning funding and support reported that the project and the resources they received contributed to a positive impact on the community partner, non-profit, or local business with which they worked (Hicks, 2016b). This impact was cited more often than any other result in the instructor reflections drawn between Fall 2013 and Spring 2016. Beyond this, the next most frequently occurring themes included affirmations that the project would continue; the intention to expand the project to other courses and involve other colleagues within their department; and the intention to expand the project to additional community partners and organizations (Hicks, 2016b).

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this paper is to describe the development of the Applied Learning and Teaching Community, an initiative designed to further integrate applied learning— including community engagement— into the identity, practice, and teaching ethos of the university. Since its inception, the ALTC has grown from a small group of faculty members to a core component of UNCW's

commitment to applied learning and a mainstay of university culture. By extension, the initiative has greatly increased the visibility of new and enhanced community-engaged projects and associated best practices. Models for inclusion and sustainability practiced by the ALTC support the uniqueness of the initiative and promote its effectiveness. The faculty-led design provides structure for applied learning programs while maintaining fluidity in governance. Responsiveness to the shifting landscape of applied learning in higher education is also a key feature. The ALTC offers institutions an example of a successful, meaningful initiative that could be adopted or modified giving consideration to the individual university's identity and context. The initiative demonstrates the potential for organic development of applied learning programs within institutions in a manner that observes best pedagogical practices while staying true to the needs and climate of the campus.

### **Limitations**

Despite considerable success, the ALTC has faced a number of challenges during its five years of operation. While the practice of bringing in new faculty fellows on each semester has helped to deepen commitment to applied learning, regular reinvention is required and depends fundamentally on the initiative of faculty fellows, many of whom are doing the work for overload, supplemental pay. These challenges have been partly addressed by reinforcing our two-fellow per semester model with additional "assistant fellows" in some semesters, who are more project focused but who also contribute in a variety of ways. Veterans of the ETEAL projects are encouraged to continue commitment as voluntary "associate fellows" who attend meetings and help direct activities.

Consistency in leadership has also proved challenging, as the involvement of some faculty is in a service capacity while they simultaneously hold additional administrative responsibilities outside of the ALTC. Dedicated administrative capacity for the ETEAL initiative, especially its half-time director, is likewise spread thin at times. While interest in the positions on the part of faculty remains, the recruitment process has never been successfully formalized, making timelines, deadlines, and expectations for fellows somewhat variable. While a variety of priorities reflects the bottom-up nature of the initiative, it has at times left good projects uncompleted, and

produced difficulty in creating a consistent effort to support and engage all practitioners. The institution has recently decided to increase resources dedicated to applied learning in the form of a permanent director and half-time associate director, which is expected to help considerably with these challenges.

Moreover, these resources can serve to strengthen the efforts to support community-engaged applied learning. In reference to Campus Compact's (2010) recommendations, the ALTC has worked to support the logistical and technical needs of community-engaged projects, through these efforts could be increased and perhaps more coordinated with relevant units on campus (e.g., the Office of Community Engagement). Such a collaboration would enable additional stakeholders to play a more intentional role in developing applied learning opportunities on campus. As recommended, the use of evaluation tools specific to community engagement, such as the Civic Engagement VALUE rubric offered by AAC&U (2009b), would provide useful data to inform future efforts to support civic and community-engaged applied learning experiences, as well. Increasing the intentional focus on civic-minded teaching within the ALTC will support the impact on students' development and the applied learning initiative as a whole.

#### **Implications for Practice and Research**

The design of the ALTC has particular significance for community engagement as well as future scholarship. Research has shown the value of community engagement to applied learning, student achievement, and the creation of community (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2012; O'Connor et al., 2011; Perry & Katula, 2001). The AAC&U advocates for the expansion of community engagement in higher education to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse democracy and cultivate civic responsibility (AAC&U, 2009b). Emphasis on personal and social responsibility is essential to a 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum in order to foster an aware and involved citizenry. In keeping with research stressing the importance of community engagement to maintaining universities' responsiveness to contemporary issues, the ALTC recommends that learning opportunities follow the recommendation that partnerships should be mutually beneficial to university and community (Kellogg, 1999). Examples of ALTC projects include developing educational materials for

public schools, conducting research for a public health organization, and designing a website for a local business. These activities allowed community partners to benefit from the tangible products of applied learning while simultaneously lending support to the curriculum. Future research efforts should include the development of measures for understanding the impact of community engagement on all contributors, with attention to ways in which community engagement can prove beneficial in unforeseen ways (O'Connor et al., 2011).

Importantly, the ALTC serves as an example of an initiative successful in addressing a number of other trends in higher education including a focus on high-impact practices (HIPs), assessment, interdisciplinarity, and campus climate—all of which can have a positive impact on civic and community engagement. The AAC&U asserts that HIPs benefit student engagement and successful learning among students from diverse backgrounds (Kuh, 2008). The AAC&U advocates for HIPs that encourage community engagement directly, such as internships; service and community-based learning; and experiential learning focused on diversity and global citizenship (such as study abroad programs). Other suggested HIPs could serve as a mechanism to facilitate or enhance pre-existing community-oriented applied learning (Kuh, 2008). These include developing first-year experiences, common intellectual experiences, collaborative assignments, or learning communities (Kuh, 2008). The ALTC recognizes the potential synergy between community engagement and HIPs and works to promote this collaboration across campus.

Educational assessment is a critical and challenging aspect of higher education. The ALTC occupies a unique role in promoting assessment of applied learning initiatives at UNCW. Sibthorp (2009) emphasizes the importance of assessment to applied learning endeavors and the production of data that goes beyond simply explaining how a program fits with standard practices. To this end, the ALTC has documented and produced research explaining the effects of the adoption of applied learning at UNCW, with attention to how applied learning has positively influenced curricula, why this was so, and what factors facilitated the growth of applied learning at UNCW. Consequently, the ALTC aims to contribute to the discussion surrounding the institutionalization of applied learning in

higher education, advocating for community engagement and other applied learning practices.

Additionally, the ALTC sustains a commitment to interdisciplinarity, in keeping with recent trends. Like community engagement, interdisciplinarity contributes to the creation of a relevant curriculum for cultivating well-rounded students (Kellogg, 1999). Additionally, collaboration across fields of study creates the potential for students to gain critical insight on their own field through the perspectives of others. Toward this end, interdisciplinarity has been central to the development of ALTC through projects and the composition of faculty fellows who have contributed to cross-disciplinary mentorship and professional development. Interdisciplinary learning experiences for students are encouraged, and previously uninitiated faculty and disciplines are given priority for funding in order to increase the accessibility and range of applied learning on campus.

Further research regarding the impact of implementing initiatives such as the ALTC could investigate effective means of sustaining and cultivating institutional, student, and faculty interest in experiential projects, as well as specific characteristics that contribute to the success of those endeavors. Internal research and evaluation of programs has already shown evidence of faculty-reported gains in areas such as awareness of applied learning and opportunities, or the impact their applied learning projects can have on their community partners. Future efforts can and will be more intentionally focused on the steps leading up to the implementation of these projects, as well as mentoring, workshop design and evaluation, and faculty development efforts.

Efforts to discover discrete factors that enable successful applied learning can be difficult because of the variety of experiences, methods of measurement, and contextual influences (Ewert & Sibthorp, 2009). Generalizability, confounding variables, and controlling for situational impacts are particularly relevant issues to consider when planning future research on applied learning. Efforts to incorporate experiential approaches to curricula have, at times, been met with difficulty due to lack of institutional support and resistance from faculty who favor a more traditional approach to teaching (Austin & Rust, 2015). Implementing a similar model at another institution would be most effective with

consideration to the context of the university's mission, vision, resources, and needs. Research attending to these varied considerations is needed.

#### Author Note

Jacquelyn Lee is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington located in Wilmington, North Carolina. Correspondence can be directed to Jacquelyn Lee, leej@uncw.edu, School of Social Work, College of Health and Human Services, University of North Carolina Wilmington, 601 South College Rd., Wilmington, NC 28403.

#### References

- Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2007). *College learning for the new global century: A report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from [https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/GlobalCentury\\_final.pdf](https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/GlobalCentury_final.pdf)
- Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2008). *College learning for the new global century: Executive summary with employers' views on learning outcomes and assessment approaches*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from [https://secure.aacu.org/AACU/PDF/GlobalCentury\\_ExecSum\\_3.pdf](https://secure.aacu.org/AACU/PDF/GlobalCentury_ExecSum_3.pdf)
- Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2009a). *Integrated and applied learning VALUE rubric*. Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/integrative-learning>
- Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2009b). *Civic engagement VALUE rubric*. Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/civic-engagement-value-rubric>
- Ash, S. L., & Clayton, P. H. (2009). Generating, deepening, and documenting learning: The power of critical reflection in applied learning. *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education*, 1(1), 25-48.
- Astin, A. W., & Sax, L. J. (1998). How undergraduates are affected by service participation. *Journal of College Student Development*, 39(3), 251-263.

- Austin, M. J., & Rust, D. Z. (2015). Developing an experiential learning program: Milestones and challenges. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 27(1), 143-153.
- Campus Compact. (2010). *A promising connection: Increasing college access and success through civic engagement*. Retrieved from <http://www.compact.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/A-Promising-Connection.pdf>
- Celio, C. I., Durlak, J., & Dymnicki, A. (2011). A meta-analysis of the impact of service learning on students. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 34(2), 164-181.
- Coakley, L. A., & Sousa, K. J. (2013). The effects of contemporary learning approaches on student perceptions in an introductory business course. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 13(3), 1-22.
- Ewert, A., & Sibthorp, J. (2009). Creating outcomes through experiential education: The challenge of confounding variables. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 31(3), 376-389.
- Fitzgerald, G. A. (2012). Engaging faculty in community engagement. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, 9(2), 101-106.
- Hicks, R. A. (2014). *Summer Institute survey report: Applied learning* [Survey results and analysis]. Retrieved from <https://uncw.edu/eteal/documents/SummerInstituteSurveyReport.pdf>
- Hicks, R. A. (2015). *2015 Summer Institute survey report: Applied learning* [Survey results and analysis]. Retrieved from <https://uncw.edu/eteal/Initiatives/documents/2015SummerInstituteReport.pdf>
- Hicks, R. A. (2016a). *Summer Institute survey report* [Survey results and analysis]. Retrieved from <https://uncw.edu/eteal/Initiatives/documents/2016SummerInstituteReport.pdf>
- Hicks, R. A. (2016b). *Experiencing transformative education through applied learning instructor interviews and surveys: The impact of applied learning*. Unpublished raw data.
- Hicks, R. A. (2017). *Summer Institute survey report: Applied learning* [Survey results and analysis]. Retrieved from <https://uncw.edu/eteal/documents/2017SummerInstituteReport.pdf>
- Hord, S. (2004). Professional learning communities: An overview. In S. Hord (ed.), *Learning together, leading together: Changing schools through professional learning communities* (pp. 5-15). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999). *Returning to our roots: The engaged institution*. Retrieved from <http://www.aplu.org/library/returning-to-our-roots-the-engaged-institution/file>
- Kuh, G. D. (Ed.). (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Lantz, C., Posey, M., Ashe, D., Boyd, S., Bredbenner, C., Compton, W., . . . Reber, E. (2017). *Enhancing our new comparative advantage: The future of applied Learning at UNCW: Experiencing transformative education through applied learning reflection committee final report*. Unpublished report, University of North Carolina, Wilmington, NC.
- Lee, J. J., Ashe, D., Reeves, J., Boersma, J., DeVall, K. & Forehand, M. (2014, February). *Cultivating community engagement through applied learning: An innovative, campus-wide model*. Presented at the Pathways to Achieving Civic Engagement Conference, Wilmington, NC.
- Louis, K. S., Kruse, S. D., & Associates. (1995). *Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Michaelsen, L. K., & McCord, M. (2011). The integrative business experience: A practical approach for learning by doing. *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education*, 3, 25-43.

- National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. (2012). *A crucible moment: College learning and democracy's future*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from [http://www.aacu.org/civic\\_learning/crucible/](http://www.aacu.org/civic_learning/crucible/)
- O'Connor, K. M., Lynch, K., & Owen, D. (2011). Student-community engagement and the development of graduate attributes. *Education and Training, 53*(2), 100-115.
- Parker, M. A., Ashe, D., Boersma, J., Hicks, R., & Bennett, V. (2015). Good teaching starts here: Applied learning at the graduate teaching assistant institute. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 45*(3), 84.
- Perry, J. L., & Katula, M. C. (2001). Does service affect citizenship? *Administration and Society, 33*(3), 330-365.
- Reeves, S., Fletcher, S., Barr, H., Birch, I., Boet, S., Davies, N., . . . Kitto, S. (2016). A BEME systematic review of the effects of interprofessional education: BEME guide 39. *Medical Teacher, 38*(7), 656-668.
- Rubin, S. (2000). Developing community through experiential education. *New Directions for Higher Education, 2000*(109), 43-50.
- Sibthorp, J. (2009). Making a difference with experiential education research: Quality and focus. *Journal of Experiential Education, 31*(3), 456-459.
- Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. (2006). Professional learning communities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change, 7*(4), 221-258.
- University of North Carolina Wilmington. (2011). *UNCW quality enhancement plan topic area: Applied learning topic pre-proposal—expanding the professorate: A UNCW teaching community*. Unpublished Report, Wilmington, NC.
- University of North Carolina Wilmington. (2013). *Quality enhancement plan eTEAL: Experiencing transformative education through applied learning* [November 2012 Version plus August 2013 response]. Unpublished report, Wilmington, NC.
- University of North Carolina Wilmington (2015). *Experiencing transformative education through applied Learning (ETEAL): 14-15 academic year review*. Unpublished report, Wilmington, NC.
- University of North Carolina Wilmington. (2016a). [Experiencing transformative education through applied learning (ETEAL): Report of faculty end-of-experience surveys]. Unpublished raw data.
- University of North Carolina Wilmington (2016b). *Experiencing transformative education through applied learning (ETEAL): 15-16 academic year review*. Unpublished report, Wilmington, NC.
- University of North Carolina Wilmington (2016c). *Strategic plan 2016—21*. Retrieved from <https://uncw.edu/strategicplan/interiorpage.html>
- University of North Carolina Wilmington (2017a). *Applied learning initiatives in the career center*. Unpublished report, Wilmington, NC.
- University of North Carolina Wilmington (2017b). *Experiencing transformative education through applied learning (ETEAL): 16-17 academic year review*. Unpublished report, Wilmington, NC.
- University of North Carolina Wilmington (2017c). [Experiencing transformative education through applied learning advisory board report (ETEAL): Student reflection scores over time, end of experience survey, and follow-up survey findings]. Unpublished raw data.
- University of North Carolina Wilmington (2017d). [Experiencing Transformative Education through Applied Learning (ETEAL) Project Statistics]. Unpublished raw data.
- University of North Carolina Wilmington (n.d.). Assessment at UNCW: UNCW learning goals. Unpublished instrument. Retrieved from <http://uncw.edu/assessment/goals.html>