Institutionalizing TILT Across a University

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Institutionalizing Transparency Across an Institution

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Abstract

Transparency in learning and teaching (TILT) is key to student success, as it allows students to understand directions and make concrete steps toward completing a set of tasks. The present paper outlines the early stages of a campus-wide program at one institution that integrates TILT practices across campus in the classroom as well as non-academic units. TILT practices make the purpose, required tasks, and criteria for success clear to students in everyday campus interactions with faculty and staff. TILT programming for faculty and staff is described, including strengths, challenges, and future directions.

In recent years transparency practices have found their way into classrooms across the country through faculty development initiatives, the most prominent of which has been TILT Higher Ed (Winkelmes, 2014). Through orchestrated efforts originating from faculty development centers, as well as at the individual classroom level, faculty have discovered the positive impact of explaining the purpose, articulating the tasks, and providing rubrics and criteria for success for different course elements, including assignments, syllabi, exams, study guides, and more. Student success measures resulting from an increase in transparency include a stronger sense of purpose, motivation, clarity, and connection to course objectives (Anderson et al., 2013), and increased academic confidence, sense of belonging in college, metacognitive self-awareness of skill development, and persistence (Winkelmes et al., 2016).

There are many noted benefits for making material more transparent for students, including those just mentioned (i.e., a better sense of purpose, motivation, clarity, and connection to course objectives [Anderson et al., 2013]). Transparency also increases academic confidence, sense of belonging in college, metacognitive self-awareness of skill development, and persistence (Winkelmes et al., 2016). There is even evidence that explicit instructions impact students' performance (Liou & Chen, 2018). Transparency has been particularly important during pandemic times given students' limited cognitive bandwidth, as it allows students to clearly see the purpose of a task and follow a set of clear guidelines to meet the course objectives (Allendoerfer, 2022). These outcomes are particularly beneficial for first-generation students and underserved students (Winkelmes et al., 2019), including in the online environment (Howard et al., 2020). Transparency helps bridge achievement gaps and helps students who do not understand instructions or who

have a difficult time reading between the lines better understand what is being asked of them.

Over the course of 2021-2022 (spanning two academic years), the institution at the center of this paper, Georgia Southwestern State University, aimed to implement transparency practices, otherwise known as transparency in learning and teaching, or TILT, into the fabric of the institution. This includes offering systematic, long-term programming surrounding TILT principles for faculty *and* staff across all units of the institution to provide the foundation for student success in all areas. By infusing TILT across the entire campus, we hoped for a cumulative effect that would support students navigating college to succeed.

The purpose of this manuscript is to outline the TILT program as a strategy for student success (McNair, 2016) by describing the TILT program at the institutional level, which involved academic and student affairs divisions. Specifically, the paper outlines institutional programming surrounding TILT (i.e., faculty and staff orientation and faculty learning communities) that contributed to TILT awareness and implementation across campus. The paper then examines the program's successes to date and challenges encountered and concludes with future directions for our institution regarding the number of people involved and attitudes towards TILT as a method for student success.

Background

Georgia Southwestern State University (GSW) is a regional state university located in southwest Georgia. GSW offers a variety of undergraduate programs in art, business, education, humanities, nursing, science, and technology, as well as several graduate programs. GSW's total student enrollment for fall 2021 was 3158. Thirty-eight percent of GSW undergraduates receive Pell Grants (a measure of financial need), and 53% are first-generation college students. The fall 2021 student population was 58.8% White, 24.8% African American, 7.3% Asian and Pacific Islander, 6.4% Hispanic, 2.3% Multiracial, and 1.0% were Native American or Unknown. GSW is one of 26 member institutions of the University System of Georgia (USG).

Building Momentum around TILT

As a USG institution, GSW was actively involved in the system-wide program known as Momentum Approach. Momentum is a collection of student success strategies that aim to help students make purposeful choices, cultivate productive academic mindsets, maintain full momentum along a clear pathway, heighten academic engagement, and complete critical milestones (Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, 2021). As part of the Momentum Approach plan, participating institutions must declare a "Big Idea" that will be the focus of that institution's student success efforts for the upcoming year. After discussing several possibilities, the GSW Momentum Taskforce, which included executive administrators, directors, and staff, identified the TILT framework as the modality for student success through Momentum Approach for the 2021-22 academic year.

Although GSW's TILT institution-wide program stemmed from the USG's Momentum efforts, GSW's TILT efforts were already in place, as faculty across disciplines had been leading transparency faculty development activities for years. Prior to 2021, GSW had an established teaching circle program in place where faculty members lead colleagues from across disciplines to engage in teaching activities, including flipped classrooms, high impact practices, and TILT. Teaching circle moderators and participants each received a modest stipend. Some faculty had also already participated in the Governor's Teaching Fellows program or Chancellor's Learning Scholars program, both of which are selective, intensive programs where faculty engage with other faculty from across the state to improve their teaching. TILT was an element of both statewide programs. Some faculty participants brought their knowledge back to GSW and shared it with others through the teaching circle program. Further, some of the faculty leading the transparency teaching groups at GSW later became part of the TILT steering committee that spearheaded the campus TILT program described in this article. Altogether, these activities were providing a patchwork of TILT strategies in classrooms across the institution and were making meaningful differences in student learning and engagement; however, TILT was not yet infused into all corners of the university, including the Division of Student Engagement and Success, which includes admissions, financial aid, first-year experience, campus life, student activities, recreation and wellness, and student health services.

Rationale for Transparency

Though most applications of TILT focus on classroom elements, it is just as important to think of transparency (or lack thereof) in terms of the wider range of challenges and interactions that students face on campus and in college. For example, students (particularly first-generation students) have difficulty navigating the registration process, understanding financial aid, or starting a new registered student organization (RSO). Despite having information available on a website, students may not be familiar with office locations, how to accurately complete paperwork (or even where to find the paperwork), when deadlines are, or the purpose of completing paperwork, such as a financial aid application. Students may already feel overwhelmed by the college experience–with classes, extracurricular activities, and new patterns of life–so it is key to provide students with transparency at every step to help them better navigate required processes throughout their college career.

By identifying TILT as a method to increase student success, we hoped to incorporate transparency and equity into campus interactions between students, faculty, and staff. McNair (2016) notes "those responsible for designing high-impact educational experiences (e.g., faculty, student affairs professionals, and administrators) should intentionally help students 'connect-the-dots' and explain exactly why engagement in these experiences should matter to their success, both in the short- and long-term." (p. 1) For students, the reasoning is clear: understanding the purpose, required tasks, and criteria for success of any task, from writing a term paper to completing a financial aid packet, helps students feel more

confident, master the material, and accomplish their goals.

TILT Programming

As our "Big Idea" for 2021-2022, GSW's academic administration, guided strategically by Dr. Suzanne Smith, Provost, and led on-the-ground by Dr. Judy Orton Grissett, Director of Experiential Learning, hoped to achieve widespread sharing and implementation of TILT across faculty (including instructional) and student affairs staff at GSW. To do this, we took a multi-prong approach to disseminating information, engaging faculty and staff, and fostering an understanding for how transparency is key to student success. Below are the offerings, strategies, and support we provided throughout the year, beginning in spring 2021:

1. Designated and dedicated group of faculty on an ad hoc TILT steering committee who were at the forefront of the TILT movement across campus and worked directly with other faculty to facilitate summer faculty learning communities. This group was constituted informally in Spring 2021, then recognized as a formal faculty committee during the 2021-2022 school year.
2. Introductory TILT workshops open to faculty and staff hosted by experts in the field
3. Year-long faculty and staff professional development offerings, including summer faculty learning communities (faculty) and brown bag workshops (faculty and staff)

TILT Steering Committee

At the outset of the formalized TILT program, a group of six faculty from different disciplinary backgrounds and who were previously involved in TILT efforts on campus, were invited to serve on a TILT steering committee to plan TILT programming, serve as mentors to new faculty on TILT-related matters, brainstorm session topics for the TILT brown bag workshops, and serve as facilitators for the TILT FLC summer series. The steering committee served a one-year term (2021-22) and received a stipend for their work. Although the TILT steering committee is no longer a formal committee, they continue to serve as TILT liaisons and work to embed transparency into their own courses even today.

Introductory TILT Workshops

Our campus-wide TILT programming began in earnest in April 2021. At that time, students had largely returned to campus following the pandemic shut-down, and faculty were teaching most of their courses in-person. Still, nearly all our professional development workshops and meetings were still being held virtually to provide flexibility to attendees. Although the virtual format posed some challenges, including perceived lack of engagement from participants, offering virtual programming allowed us to invite remote guest speakers, including Dr. Mary-Ann Winkelmes, founder and CEO of TILT Higher Ed. Dr. Winkelmes led a 90-minute professional development session that introduced faculty and staff attendees to the basic principles of TILT, including several examples, and members of the TILT steering committee facilitated breakout sessions for

participants. Unlike most professional development opportunities that focus on strategies (e.g., pedagogical strategies) that have a potential impact on student success, all faculty and staff were invited to attend the workshop. The event was promoted through campus-wide email announcements beginning several weeks prior to the event. A total of 29 faculty and administrators (deans and vice-provosts) participated in the session. Unfortunately, no staff attended the virtual session.

Summer TILT Faculty Learning Communities

Immediately following the TILT orientation workshop with Dr. Winkelmes, we kicked off a summer faculty learning community (FLC) series geared toward faculty. Faculty were recruited through email announcements beginning the day of the workshop, and over the course of the next few days, a total of 31 faculty and teaching staff registered for the FLC series. After approximately 10% attrition, 28 faculty and teaching staff fully participated in the summer series by joining one of six FLC groups led by a trained TILT facilitator. All six TILT FLC facilitators were also part of the TILT steering committee and had prior TILT experience, either by participating in a Governor's Teaching Fellows or Chancellor's Learning Scholars program (each described above). These facilitators served as the campus champions for TILT prior to the campus-wide TILT initiative described here. The six TILT facilitators, as well as the TILT initiative coordinator (Grissett), attended a one-hour facilitator training session led by Dr. Mary-Ann Winkelmes. The training provided faculty with information about how to lead a faculty learning community, how to structure time by centering it around a topic of discussion,

and types of deliverables (e.g., assignments, syllabi, exams, study guides, etc.).

Prior to the first summer FLC meeting, all faculty participants and facilitators were invited to attend a TILT workshop hosted by Dr. Denise Domizi, Director of Faculty Development with the University System of Georgia, and Dr. Jesse Bishop, Dean of Planning, Assessment, Accreditation, and Research at Georgia Highlands College. The purpose of the workshop was to provide additional information about TILT before the summer FLC session began and to answer lingering questions faculty may have about TILT.

Over the course of the summer 2021 semester, each FLC met virtually a total of three times. The meetings served as a space for participants to share progress on their own TILT efforts and receive feedback from peers. Each faculty participant transformed a single course element—i.e., syllabus (n = 5), assignment (n = 22), or study guide (n = 1)—that they planned to implement in the upcoming academic year (2022-23). All participants wrote a brief reflection at the conclusion of the FLC outlining their perceived successes, challenges, and general feedback about the FLC and TILT process, which is described further in the following section. The 28 participants represented all colleges at the university: College of Education (n = 5), College of Nursing and Health Sciences (n = 5), Arts and Sciences, which included faculty from Biology, English, History, Psychology, and Sociology (n = 10), College of Business and Computing (n = 7), and teaching staff (n = 1) who oversaw and taught the first-year student orientation class but had no college affiliation.

This was the first time GSW offered faculty development over the summer, and we were quite pleased with the results in terms of the number of participants and level of engagement. Given the success of the first summer FLC series in 2021, we conducted a second FLC series in summer 2022, which concluded in June 2022. Half the number of faculty (n =14) participated in the second FLC series with representation from the College of Education (n = 1), College of Nursing and Health Sciences (n = 1), Arts and Sciences (n = 7), which included faculty from Communication and Emerging Media, Chemistry, English, History, Psychology, and Spanish, and College of Business and Computing (n = 5). During the summer 2022 FLC, faculty transformed a syllabus (n = 1), assignments (n = 10), email instructions to students (n = 1), and exams (n = 2). All participants again wrote a reflection about their experience with TILT and the FLC (see next section, "Summer FLCs: Faculty Feedback").

As a result of the TILT FLC series, we can estimate students in no less than 42 courses across the 2021-2023 academic years (and perhaps beyond for those faculty who will continue to use their TILTed course elements) have received the benefit of enhanced transparency in their classrooms, whether in the form of a syllabus, assignment, study guide, or some other course element. These outcomes are difficult to measure, but we believe that, based on the number of faculty who participated and their plans for implementation, the impact was far-reaching across campus, though there is still no doubt room for further expansion.

Staff did not participate in the initial summer learning communities because of the program design, which focused on transforming academic course elements.

Professional development opportunities for staff were developed in fall 2021 during the inaugural TILT Brown Bag sessions, where we held a professional development workshop specifically for faculty (see "Brown Bag Workshops" section below).

Summer FLCs: Faculty Feedback

Faculty participants and facilitators provided feedback during both the summer 2021 and summer 2022 faculty learning community programs. At the end of the FLC program for summer 2021 and summer 2022, faculty (and some facilitators) provided feedback in the form of a written reflection. These written reflections were part of the participants' deliverables and completion of the reflections were required to be eligible for the participation stipend. In the reflections, faculty were asked to write a brief (approximately 500 words), candid reflection about their TILT experiences. The reflections could have included comments regarding any of the following questions: "What did you learn about TILT?", "What did you find challenging about the TILT process? What did you find rewarding?", "What are your next steps with TILT?", and "What suggestions do you have about the TILT process?"

In summer 2022 faculty participants and facilitators also provided feedback in the form of a brief post-participation survey in addition to their post-FLC reflections. The survey questions were, "What were some of the strengths of the FLC program?" What worked best? What did you enjoy?", "What challenges did you encounter with the FLC program?", "What topic would you like to see offered for next summer's FLC?", and "Please feel free to share any additional thoughts, suggestions, and/or questions

here." The purpose of the survey was to allow faculty to provide anonymous feedback to help improve future FLC implementations.

In their written reflections and surveys, participants and facilitators noted several benefits from participating in the FLCs (see Palmer et al., current issue, for a more extensive review on faculty experiences with the FLC program at GSW). Following the summer 2021 and 2022 FLC series, participants noted in their reflections several benefits from participating, which included having faculty from different disciplines participate in their group to receive feedback from different perspectives, having a structure to review, revise, and receive feedback regarding course elements that need improvement, and working under the leadership of a TILT facilitator. As one faculty noted in their reflection, "The best part of this experience was learning from other faculty members about their experiences in the classroom." Another faculty member wrote, "The more we can get eyes from outside our disciplinary and methodological trained incapacities, the better the underlying assumptions of an assignment (or the opacity thereof) can be explored." Other faculty noted their appreciation for setting aside time dedicated to developing new things alongside other faculty. "Looking back on the TILT professional development process and reflecting on my pre-TILT and post-TILT current event assignment, I observed the importance of thoughtful reflection and intentional planning for each assignment I use in my course." Based on informal, verbal feedback from participants and facilitators, summer seemed to be a particularly good time to conduct the faculty learning communities, given most faculty have lesser teaching loads in the summer.

Participants and facilitators also noted several challenges in their written reflections and in the post-participation surveys. The biggest challenge faculty faced was the restricted timeline of the summer series, particularly for summer 2022, where faculty had less than one month to meet with their groups three times and make a course element more transparent. The timeline was compressed in summer 2022 due to budgetary reasons–participant and facilitator stipends had to be drawn from the current fiscal year, which ended in June 2022. Other challenges faculty and facilitators noted were technology and scheduling conflicts, but in both cases, solutions were provided in the feedback, such as rescheduling meetings when "technology was not a friend" and scheduling supplemental meetings for faculty who could not make a meeting to resolve scheduling issues. Faculty also reported they were able to make the compressed time schedule work, engage in meaningful dialogue, and accomplish their goals.

Despite challenges, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive with virtually all faculty mentioning how good the experience was and how they strongly enjoyed the supportive environment provided by their peers. Some pointed out how this experience helped their course become more student-centered. For instance, "The collaboration with TILT members helped me move from a teacher-centered to a student-centered mindset with this activity." (see Crosby & Short, current issue, for more on student-centered teaching with TILT). Overall, the FLCs were helpful for faculty to transform course elements and talk with others, particularly those from other disciplines, about the process.

Brown Bag Workshops

In fall 2021 and spring 2022, GSW hosted a series of five interactive brown bag workshops each of which focused on a TILT topic. At each session, faculty and staff were able to eat lunch, which was provided at no charge to participants, while they learned about various topics related to TILT as presented by GSW faculty (including some TILT steering committee members) and guest presenters. Members of the TILT steering committee nominated topics to be covered based on interest and university needs. Final workshop topics for fall 2021 included study skills for students, TILT and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and an introduction to TILT for staff members in the Division of Student Engagement and Success. In spring 2022 topics included faculty-led student feedback processes and using mindfulness and body awareness to bring a sense of transparency and connection to purpose.

Our most well-attended brown bag session was the introduction to TILT for staff members in the Division of Student Engagement and Success. Twenty-three staff participants from admissions, financial aid, residence life, and student activities attended and learned about how to implement TILT into their respective units. The Executive Vice President of the division encouraged staff participation and explained that this would be something they would find beneficial in their areas. We believe that this encouragement and support at the executive administrative level had a positive impact on staff attendance rates.

Efforts to include staff in TILT professional development are still in the early stages, but the Brown Bag workshop

centered on staff was an important first step. Because of GSW's small campus size, students will likely interact directly with not only faculty, but also office staff regularly in the Division of Student Engagement and Success, including Recruitment and Admissions, Financial Aid, First-Year Experience, and Residential and Campus Life. It is therefore important for these offices to incorporate transparency into their work in student success. When considering how they engage with students, staff in these areas can use the same strategies typically used in academic settings, which include posing questions that students should ask themselves when encountering a new set of instructions:

1. Am I able to complete the tasks involved? If so, how can I? (task)
2. Do I have a checklist to follow and access to multiple examples? (criteria)
3. What will I gain by doing this activity? How will this help me in and beyond college? (purpose)

TILT Initiative Strengths, Challenges, and Future Directions

The TILT program introduced transparency principles to faculty and staff institution-wide through the form of systematic programming and the support of a TILT steering committee. The strengths and weaknesses of this program are described below.

Strengths

The TILT programming that has happened at GSW over the past two years has several notable strengths. First, GSW's small size arguably made the TILT program

easier to infiltrate more corners of campus. We were able to introduce TILT to most of the campus within a few weeks, and nearly a quarter of the 114 teaching faculty (n = 28) participated in the inaugural TILT summer faculty learning community series. Similarly, faculty development efforts tend to have a wide range, so although attendance at workshops may be low, their impact reach faculty across departments—once a faculty member in a department participates and has a good experience, they are likely to share that experience with others in the department, leading to increased faculty awareness and experience.

Next, campus TILT efforts were intentionally extended to include staff, not just teaching faculty. This stemmed from the core belief that staff are crucial to student success–students touch most or all these areas throughout their college experience, and we must include them in our transparency work if the goal is student success. A few examples include helping students navigate the processes of joining organization a registered student organization, taking on student leadership positions, participating in campus activities, and understanding the processes and purpose of applications and other documentation for housing, financial aid, and admissions. We did not follow up with staff through systematic efforts, such as surveys, to learn more about the ways the TILT workshop impacted their work; however, we did receive reports from at least one attendee from Campus Life that they began restructuring their documents to be more transparent and were now more conscientious about the transparency of their communication with students. These small changes, together with other small changes across campus in different units, will make a real difference over time.

The summer faculty learning communities also had strengths that contributed to TILT adoption across campus. Most prominently, the interdisciplinary nature of faculty learning communities (FLCs) and faculty development sessions allowed faculty to exchange ideas across disciplines and strengthen collegiality between faculty in different departments. Thus, faculty can get feedback from others with a different disciplinary perspective. These were strengths that were mentioned repeatedly in the faculty reflections and surveys following the summer faculty learning communities.

Finally, several faculty (and at least one staff member) expressed that their TILT work was ongoing; once they began TILTing, they continued to make other materials more transparent. This is one way having faculty or staff participate in a short-term work-based series can lead to long-term transformations.

Challenges

All programs and initiatives experience challenges and learning opportunities, the present one notwithstanding. Whereas on the one hand, there was a large degree of excitement surrounding TILT among faculty and staff, the challenges of working within a classroom or office did not disappear. Instead, several existing challenges came to light when implementing TILT. At one workshop, several faculty and staff expressed that no matter how transparent something may be, they cannot force students to engage with it. Participants cited students not reading emails or instructions that were carefully crafted and that presumably already had a high degree of

transparency. This is a real concern and has become even more of an increased challenge during the pandemic, where student (and faculty and staff) engagement has waned.

A second challenge included concerns surrounding the ideal amount of transparency. Too little would not yield desired effects, and worse, too much transparency would constitute "spoon feeding" students. Balloo et al. (2018) argue against this latter perception, noting that transparency instead creates an increase in self-regulation as opposed to dependency. In response to these concerns, we recommended faculty and staff aim for *progress* with their transparency work, not perfection. The goal is to have the element more, not perfectly, transparent, and making all course elements transparent takes time.

Lastly, there was the sentiment among some that the program was yet another in a long-line of top-down system-generated initiatives; to this point, several faculty who participated in the learning communities expressed that they, too, held this belief initially, but once they participated and understood the nature and potential effect of transparency, they believed it to be an important, even necessary component of their teaching practices. There are several potential reasons that the TILT initiative experienced more success than other top-down initiatives that have happened at GSW. First, TILT is relatively easy to learn and requires minimal changes to course materials (though there may be a lot of course materials to make transparent, which can take time). Second, the faculty learning community model was similar to the existing teaching circle program, in which the vast majority of faculty have some experience with. In the teaching circle model, faculty meet several

times over the course of the semester to discuss a specific topic. Because faculty were accustomed to this structure, there was likely less apprehension to participate. Finally, faculty received a stipend for their participation in the TILT summer series, and this financial compensation likely played an important role in participation rates.

Future Directions

Moving forward, our goal is to further embed TILT across campus by involving additional stakeholders. This includes recruiting current faculty and staff into existing programs, including brown bag workshops and summer FLCs, and developing new programs like book clubs. It also means connecting directly with new faculty by introducing TILT during new faculty orientation and targeting new faculty for future TILT workshops. Further, students may be involved by sharing their perspectives based on their own experiences with TILT through a student panel that may be presented as part of the brown bag series. We would also like to build an intra-campus repository that houses TILTed materials to share with faculty and staff as examples, perhaps on the GSW Office of Teaching and Learning webpage.

In our first year, we introduced transparency to student affairs, but we still have much work in this area. This may include programming throughout the academic year and summer for staff. These workshops can help staff better understand the principles of transparency and develop ways to integrate transparent principles into their work. From a student's perspective, a TILT-ed campus would present the purpose, necessary tasks, and criteria for success in all campus interactions, and this entails creating

or redesigning materials and webpages to include these elements for all campus units. Another step would be to recruit at least one staff member to serve as a TILT liaison to work alongside and to help understand staff's needs and preferences regarding TILT so that specific programming can be created.

Conclusion

The current paper outlines the beginnings of a cumulative program of transparency that spans across an institution. Transparency allows students to understand, work toward, and meet their academic goals, not just academically, but across their entire college experience. The goal was to build transparency in learning and teaching (TILT) as a strategy for student success by employing the following activities at our institution:

- Connecting transparency programming and activities to student success and institutional outcomes
- Conducting faculty-led, grassroots efforts through a dedicated, knowledgeable team of faculty leaders
- Involving staff members, who often do not have the opportunity to participate in campus professional development programs
- Implementing long-term, interdisciplinary programming, including leveraging the summer as a time to work with faculty (and staff) in a supportive environment

We are still in the early stages of integrating transparent principles into campus interactions but are hopeful that our efforts will continue to grow and have an increased impact on student success. We also hope that other institutions can learn from our experiences to make their own efforts toward campus-wide transparency.

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