

Student Learning Through Co-curricular Dedication: Viterbo University Boosts Faculty/Student Research and Community Services

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Abstract:

Viterbo's Affiliate status within The Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) helped provide the context to validate SoTL efforts. During the years of Affiliate status, Viterbo faculty members were interested in studying their own teaching and sharing their work with a variety of audiences. Student/faculty disciplinary research and many faculty/student action research projects increased students' disciplinary knowledge, critical thinking, and technical skills. These activities augmented students' professional and academic credentials, developed an ongoing relationship with a faculty mentor, and provided a broader understanding of the communities in which the students live. The challenge to continue financing these efforts is aided by the ability of faculty/student research to enliven and enrich student learning outcomes.

Key Words:

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, SoTL, Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, CASTL, faculty/student summer research, action research, teaching and learning.

Introduction

Viterbo University, a small, private, Catholic, Franciscan, liberal arts institution, joined the CASTL Affiliates Program when the promotion and tenure committee recommended using Boyer's Model of Scholarship in the evaluation process. At that time, the faculty could not have precisely articulated the full benefits of adopting a broad-based conceptualization of their scholarly activities. It was clear to most teacher/scholars that Boyer's Model would legitimize their carefully designed teaching activities as a form of scholarly pursuit. The faculty members were prepared to embrace

the notion that teaching and research are not diametrically opposed activities and adopt Ernest Boyer's (1990) multiple forms of scholarship: scholarship of discovery, scholarship of integration, scholarship of application, and scholarship of teaching.

Viterbo University is a premiere teaching institution of 3,500 students. The university had engaged its entire faculty in active learning workshops through its Title Three grant. For four years, faculty members were energetically exploring what it meant to be a scholarly teacher. Campus faculty members participated in the responsible application of knowledge to consequential problems through the lived enactment of our faithful service mission. Our faculty considered the development and evaluation of pedagogical strategies designed to enhance student learning inside and outside of classroom. Because of the university's 12.6 to one student/faculty ratio, faculty members spent a great deal of time designing activities to personally enhance student learning outcomes. Thus, even though the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) as a university-endorsed form of research was relatively new at Viterbo, faculty members were motivated to actively engage students in the learning process. For example, faculty members were researching the kinds of classroom activities that could boost and extend student learning. Eighty two percent of the faculty had incorporated active learning strategies beyond those required by the Title Three grant into their course. They were also adopting the call to "make research-based learning the standard" (Boyer Commission Report 1998) in some form or other as illustrated below.

Viterbo's participation in the CASTL Affiliates Program allowed faculty members to view the student-centered projects they were engaged in as legitimate scholarly activities. Moreover, these projects improved teaching and learning strategies both in and out of the classroom. The success of our status as an Affiliate could be measured by the fact that 79% of faculty reported a continued high degree of commitment to active learning that increased student learning. The variety of research endeavors undertaken by faculty and students provided many opportunities to acquire important new knowledge and skills. Specifically, Viterbo was able to engage students in an expanded faculty/student research program that increased students' inquiry and problem solving skills. We were also able to promote action research during the academic year that augmented students' understanding of research methodologies while serving both local and global communities. Below, we discuss the types of projects undertaken and what we learned from our experiences. We also articulate the steps Viterbo plans to take in order to sustain our progress as a Carnegie CASTL Program Affiliate.

One area where faculty actively and successfully improved student-centered learning techniques outside the classroom was through the development of faculty/student summer research teams. This initiative developed powerful learning experiences for students while boosting the likelihood that a faculty member could move their research agendas forward.

Our challenge has been, and will be, to expand faculty/student research programs to connect with students across the campus. We will also need to provide the level of student funding necessary to allow students to engage in this learning opportunity rather than seek employment during the summer to finance the cost of their education. The main objective of the summer research program was to increase students' disciplinary knowledge, critical thinking, and technical skills. Additionally, the program was designed

to augment students' professional or academic credentials, clarify their career paths, develop an ongoing relationship with a faculty mentor, and learn to work independently.

The growth of the program has been encouraging. A record 14 faculty members and 29 students teamed up to produce a variety of research projects. Students participating in these projects focused on technology use in a hospital setting, archival research on the gendered voice in 18th century literature, the learning capacity of guppies, the soil balance for increased garden produce production, and the potential of light therapy in the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. In these and other projects, students and faculty were paid a small stipend and were funded using resources from benefactors, grants, local business salaries, and allocated University funding.

Faculty members report learning as much as they taught the students about the research process. One consistent theme that emerged from faculty impact reports was that faculty members felt better prepared to be more effective as classroom research teachers. As one faculty member commented, "This was an opportunity for both of us to explore and learn together." The emphasis on active learning went well beyond the typical classroom methods, as faculty members explored the parameters of working with student researchers. One faculty member claimed that, "This research will give my student the experience of presenting or publishing outside the University." Overall, faculty participants felt that their engagement in the faculty/student research projects was a "Good way to connect and mentor students as well as positively impact your own research agenda."

Students also reported significant learning achieved during the summer faculty/student research program. One student captured the feeling among the participants in this co-curricular activity saying "The experience and knowledge I have gained goes beyond what I would have achieved by simply taking one semester of research." Most of the students spoke in their impact statements about their amazement at being able to become familiar with complex research processes. One student reported that: "I was surprised when I found I could produce meaningful research." Another said that "It gave me greater confidence in my ability to conduct research and has given me greater knowledge." Other students commented on the fact that there was "so much information from so many different areas of study that seemed to come together in the simplest of procedures" or that they "learned that research involves trial and error, sometimes frustration, hard work and lots of brainpower."

Taken together, findings from student and faculty participants indicate that student learning is enhanced in very specific ways when they collaborate as research partners. The faculty/student research program allowed students in English, Business, Psychology, Computer Information Systems, Biopsychology, Biology, Nursing, Communication, and Chemistry to participate in meaningful research projects. Students presented their findings at our annual Seven Rivers Undergraduate Research Symposium. Five student/faculty pairs' research was peer reviewed and selected for presentation at regional and national disciplinary conferences. Thus, students learned the process of conducting research, helped write the results according to disciplinary standards, and learned how to construct oral presentations of their research for peers.

The challenges we face as an Institution center on financing faculty/student stipends across a variety of disciplines and the expenses associated with student travel to conferences as we continue to grow this program. As a tuition-driven institution, more permanent funding will be required as we involve more students and faculty in creative research opportunities that transform the faculty/student relationship both inside and outside of class and increase student's critical thinking.

Another area where faculty excelled during Viterbo University's time as a Carnegie CASTL Program Affiliate was through faculty/student action research projects that served to augment student learning and meet a variety of community needs. Faculty/student community action research projects produced practical knowledge that is useful for students in conducting their daily lives. This knowledge helps them prepare for the community leadership roles they will assume when they graduate. The goal of this research program is to foster relationships and collaboration among faculty and students as well as between diverse community organizations. Working in lower socio-economic neighborhoods, reaching out to provide medical care abroad, and providing learning opportunities for school-aged children allows students to "see themselves in others." These actions sustain the transformative changes that have taken place in our community through the number and variety of action research projects taking place. Several projects were completed while Viterbo was a participant in the CASTL Affiliates Program. As our experience illustrates, the power of co-curricular projects to enhance student learning was substantial.

Several schools at Viterbo have designed mission-driven projects for students that benefit local and global communities. For example, Viterbo University's School of Education offers a unique co-curricular experience for undergraduate students pursuing their teaching credentials. Viterbo has earned a strong relationship with La Crosse schools serving a large portion of lower socio-economic and underrepresented students. Viterbo University education majors spend two to three semesters working with cooperating classroom teachers and children. Not only do our students have the opportunity to observe master teachers, students practice their teaching skills in the community. After reflecting upon the intersections of theory and practice, the education majors produce a "Teacher Work Sample" (TWS). This sample demonstrated the student's ability to plan lessons that acknowledge contextual factors, instructional unit planning, and curriculum delivery. The TWS also displays suitable and pertinent analysis and reflection. Throughout the TWS process, Viterbo students learn to employ a variety of literacy models and assess the efficacy of these models in promoting learning. Teacher work samples strengthen the student's knowledge base by providing an opportunity to experience actual situations involving teaching literacy. The experience also allows students to expand the instruction provided to the children at various community schools. Additionally, our faculty members are engaging students in a form of experiential learning that is consistent with Boyer's model of scholarship. Results of this project include student presentations of teacher work samples at an undergraduate research conference and a faculty proposal entitled *Global Theories and Local Practices: Using the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model in Local Professional Development Schools* submitted for presentation at the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning conference. Also, this project has assisted students in their efforts to gain placement as student teachers.

Another example of faculty commitment to action research comes from the School of Nursing. For three years, Viterbo University nursing students in the Master of Nursing Program (NPs) earned the 60 clinical hours required for graduation doing service in San Reymundo, Guatemala. The graduate program in nursing associate dean, cultivated a partnership with the nonprofit organization Refuge International to make this action research possible. Last year, a group of five students and three faculty members treated over 400 people during a one week trip. This experience allowed the NP students to learn about treatment and holistic care while functioning in an unfamiliar culture. As the associate dean so eloquently put it, "For NP students participating in cultural immersion experiences, the value rests in the potential to cultivate life-changing knowledge, skills, and attitudes that impact their professional practice long after the experience is over." Because student learning was captured through reflective journals, the faculty members were able to analyze the data contained in the journals. Their poster presentation entitled *A Cultural Immersion Experience for NP Students: Journey to a Reframed Professional Praxis* was recognized as the Outstanding Poster Awards at the National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculties Meeting.

Undergraduate students in the School of Nursing have also had the opportunities to participate in action research through the clinical hours they provide in Belize. Last year, thirteen students went to Belize to work directly with patients at seven different clinical sites. Since its inception in 2004, over 60 nursing students have been a part of this cross-cultural clinical experience. One of the faculty leaders said that "it is more than the experience....it is really about learning to nurture relationships." A former leader of the Belize clinical trip wrote her dissertation entitled *Developing Cultural Competence in Undergraduate Baccalaureate Nursing Students through Short-term Immersion Experiences* based on student data. Her findings indicate that cultural competency can be gained through short term immersion and that it is the relationships students foster while on site (e.g. with host families, local medical staff, and daily interactions with patient) that are critical to the students' self perception of cultural competency.

Action research in the School of Fine Arts, the School of Letters and Sciences, and the School of Nursing was supported through a joint 3M grant at the Mathy Center for Education and Research. This facility, located on the Viterbo University campus, houses a Boys and Girls Club for Teens and Preteens and a shared athletic facility for University staff, faculty, students, and the Boy and Girls club members. The 3M grant entitled *Learning in Action: Developing Needs Based Programming for Neighborhood Youth* involved three disciplines: Philosophy, Dietetics, and Art. The Philosophy Department's contribution was based upon a course entitled "Philosophy for Children" that required a practicum component where Viterbo students collaborated with the teens and pre-teens on activities that helped them think more philosophically. The Dietetics Program's involvement was based upon the establishment of a fitness club facilitated by senior dietetics majors that included offering arts and crafts, educational games, and the preparation of easy and healthy snacks. The Woodcut project sponsored by the Art Department involved Viterbo students from a printmaking class pairing with teenagers at the Mathy Center who expressed interest in the art of printmaking. In all, 94 prints were made by the Viterbo students, teens, and community members who were also welcome to join. Results of the 3M initiative revealed that "the learning connections between campus and community are circular: taking 'higher level' learning to the neighborhood

brings a greater breadth and depth of learning back to the university through its students.” This project encouraged students to live their discipline and enhanced students ability to exhibit theoretical knowledge concretely.

The Dahl School of Business also engaged students in action research through their participation in SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise). Thirty two students working with their faculty advisor were awarded a \$1,000 Sam’s Club Community Grant to serve two floral companies—one retail and one wholesale. Viterbo students aided the retail floral shop in investigating its goal of using renewable energy. The students explored whether an investment in wind power (as opposed to solar power) would net the greatest rate of return over a ten year trajectory. In contrast, Viterbo students are helping the wholesale floral distributor to invest time and money in improving recycling efforts over a ten-year trajectory (e.g. disposing of floral waste in a different, expense-free method than with co-mingled trash, for which they are charged by the pound). The SIFE students presented these and other projects at the regional SIFE juried competition in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The SIFE students earned a first place award and the right to compete in the national contest. As one senior management major claimed “SIFE gives me a chance to take what I learn from the classroom and apply it...”

We do have challenges in continuing the action research projects that were initiated or refined during our time as a Carnegie CASTL Affiliate member. We will need to support the faculty member who gives generously of her or his time and talents so that students can make a difference in the lives of others and to encourage student participation. We will need to find additional funding to offset the cost of supplies provided to Belize and Guatemala residents and to help defray the cost of the trip for students. Of course, we will need to replace grant funding that allowed us to provide resources for a variety of local projects. At a largely tuition driven university with competition for resources, finding additional funds is a large project. At its heart, action research as practiced at Viterbo goes beyond traditional educational modes and is characterized by deep learning, a broader understanding of the communities in which we live, and an eagerness to create new ways to assist those in need.

Viterbo University’s participation in the Affiliates’ program has aided faculty members in exploring the natural outgrowth of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. This movement has led to acceptance of a broader definition of research through the adoption of Boyer’s model. Faculty members who have enacted action research projects or engaged students in their own scholarship of discovery are realizing the inextricable links between the student learning outcomes occurring in these projects and the opportunities to create fluid classroom boundaries. A faculty reflection session on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning this spring aided faculty members in making explicit what they are doing implicitly as an extension of the learning environments created during these projects. Importantly, the administration has agreed to support an assortment of student/faculty projects. This support emphasizes our commitment to the student learning achieved as faculty and students increase their understanding of what it means to be engaged in Boyer’s model. The result should be the establishment of strong relationships that forge a deep understanding of civic engagement that will enliven and enrich Viterbo’s learning environment for years to come.

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