

# ICED 2020 proceedings:

## Preparing for the future: Building SoTL bridges at a research university

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### **Abstract**

The Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning at George Mason University, a large public research institution in the United States, has designed a series of interventions and collaborations to nurture an emerging scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) community, building bridges to connect colleges and disciplines across a geographically dispersed campus. This paper (originally a poster) presents an overview of these efforts, which may support other institutions in their work to improve student learning now and in the future.

### **1 Introduction**

Even before the current pandemic, the global higher educational landscape was changing rapidly. Institutions of higher education are increasingly challenged to meet the demand for graduates with 21st-century skills while integrating active learning classrooms, digital literacy, and online and hybrid learning environments (Alexander et al., 2019; Spante et al., 2018; Payton, 2012; Ventimiglia & Pullman, 2016).

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is the systematic study of student learning with the goal of improving teaching and learning in higher education (Center for Engaged Learning, n.d.; STLHE, n.d.). SoTL has played a significant role in helping faculty at higher education institutions shift their focus from presenting information to documenting and improving student learning through evidence-based practices (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Felton, 2013; Shulman & Hutchings, 1999). Engaging in SoTL offers opportunities to adapt to the changing demands on higher education within the classroom and across campus through research and publication (Felton, 2013).

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Many faculty who are interested in improving teaching and learning through SoTL, however, face challenges. These include lack of familiarity with the interdisciplinary practices of SoTL, inexperience investigating one's own teaching, time, and concern over lack of recognition via review and promotion processes (Bortolin, 2018; Miller-Young et al., 2018).

Educational developers who value scholarship on student learning and faculty active in SoTL research can encourage colleagues across the university to engage in SoTL in order to better support students' preparation for future learning and careers (Alexander et al., 2016; Cox, 2004; Engin & Atkinson, 2015). In order to cultivate a SoTL community, especially within a large, research-intensive university, educational developers and engaged faculty need to take a leadership role in building bridges – in providing structures and opportunities for SoTL-related activities and for collaboration across disciplines.



## 2 SoTL initiatives

The Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning at George Mason University has taken advantage of its central position within the university to nurture an emerging faculty community, building SoTL bridges across campus for now and for the future through a multi-year, coordinated approach.

Initiatives include:

- *Innovations in Teaching & Learning conference*

The largest and most far-reaching initiative has been the *Innovations in Teaching & Learning* conference, an annual event involving a variety of session types and publication of a conference proceedings. The conference has grown from 37 presentations with 100 attendees in 2007 to more than 100 presentations and 500 attendees in 2019.

**90%**  
9 OF 10  
SCHOOLS & COLLEGES AT  
MASON PRESENTED AT  
THE 2019 ITL CONFERENCE

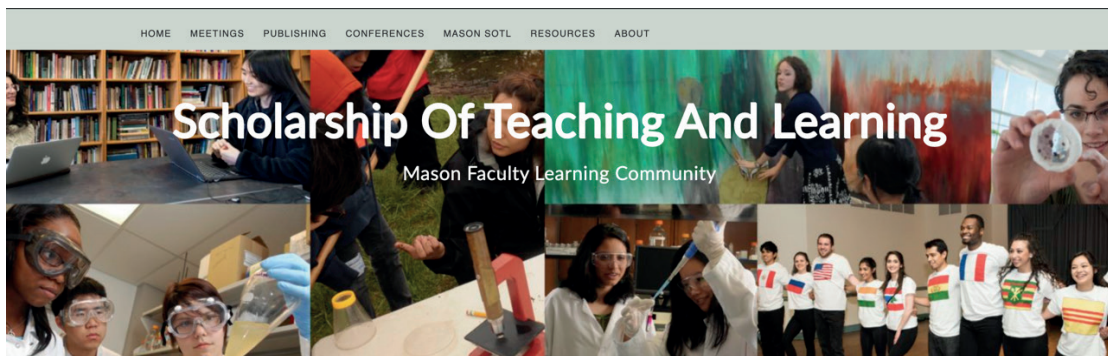
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT  
COLLEGE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
COLLEGE OF SCIENCE  
COLLEGE OF VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS  
CARTER SCHOOL FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION  
SCHAR SCHOOL OF POLICY AND GOVERNMENT  
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS  
VOLGENAU SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING  
INTO MASON  
ACADEMIC SUPPORT UNITS

While the keynote features an internationally recognized speaker, session presenters represent disciplines and units across George Mason University. The primary aim is to support community-building around teaching and learning within the institution by creating both formal and informal opportunities for faculty, graduate students, and staff

to exchange ideas, experiences, and SoTL research. Many sessions focus on the changing educational landscape by presenting SoTL research on teaching and learning with digital tools and resources, in active learning classrooms, and in online and hybrid settings.

- **Faculty Learning Community**

The SoTL faculty learning community (FLC) is an interdisciplinary, diverse group of instructors co-facilitated by faculty fellows from the colleges of engineering, science, and humanities and social sciences. Its 20 members include tenured and tenure track faculty, administrative and research faculty, term faculty and adjunct faculty. The group represents six colleges, 15 disciplines, and an international partner program (INTO Mason), a unique achievement at a large research institution. Participants share responsibility for leading monthly meetings on a rotational basis. Topics include research methods, SoTL across disciplines, grant writing, publishing, teaching strategies, digital resources, and traditional and digital assessments. The group coordinates workshops at the annual teaching and learning conference to highlight research findings and engage faculty across the university in conceptualizing new SoTL projects.



- **Online resources**

The Stearns Center website <<https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center-general-teaching-resources>> offers teaching and learning resources on a range of topics, including designing a syllabus, active learning, online learning and a general SoTL introduction.



The SoTL faculty learning community website <<https://sotl.gmu.edu>> provides information for current and prospective FLC participants, such as meeting logistics and topics, as well as resources for the broader Mason community, including national and international SoTL journals, conferences, and funding opportunities. The goal is to support all faculty seeking to conduct, publish, and fund SoTL research at Mason.

- **Collaboration with units and individuals**

The Stearns Center regularly receives requests for collaboration on SoTL projects. These include individual faculty members seeking to design SoTL projects, departmental units requesting assistance with program assessment, and partnerships for formal project evaluations. The volume of requests led to development of a standard memorandum of understanding to clarify goals and guide ongoing and future collaborations.

- **Campus-wide teaching initiatives**

SoTL collaborations have also emerged from ongoing teaching initiatives. As the university designed active learning classrooms, for example, faculty asked to conduct SoTL research in the new spaces. This led to development of resources on teaching in active learning classrooms and recommendations for a cross-unit selection process for requesting specific classrooms to support ongoing data collection.

### 3 Conclusions

This paper presents examples from one large research university in the United States, but its underlying principles can be applied across institutional settings. The central position of the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning within the university allows conversations and partnerships that are challenging to cultivate across colleges and units. The collaborations and initiatives described here demonstrate the importance of bridging traditional institutional divisions to support teaching and learning for the whole institution to prepare for the future of higher education.



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