

CREATING A COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CULTURE THROUGH THE  
PRACTICE OF THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING (SoTL)

By

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degree of Doctor of Education.

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## Abstract

At the college-level, instructors are experts in their own subject matter, but often have less knowledge of the theory and practice of successful teaching models and techniques for enhancing student learning and engagement (Burns, 2017). The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has developed as a practice that supports inquiry and assessment of teaching in higher education and. Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) have emerged from the principles of SoTL as a means for faculty to build community while assessing their own teaching effectiveness and sharing their results with others. In many institutions of higher education, faculty members and departments are well known to be isolated from each other, yet organizations that foster a collaborative, cross-disciplinary culture, including institutions of higher education, also enhance professionalism and growth. This dissertation examines the cases of three different community colleges and the ways they have implemented SoTL practices with their faculty. The study explores in what ways the implementation of SoTL practices through Faculty Learning Communities promote improved pedagogical practices and foster collaboration. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews followed up with a focus group involving all of the participants. These illustrative cases of individuals who are implementing SoTL practices at their institutions were examined as one larger case study and analyzed through the framework of Collaboration Theory. Essential themes generated were the role of the community college in SoTL, campus culture, effect on teaching, and faculty led vs top down faculty development. The implications in each theme are investigated, and the function of SoTL in the community college, as well as the effects on fostering a collaborative campus culture, is discussed.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

At the college-level, instructors are experts in their own subject matter, but often have less knowledge of the theory and practice of successful teaching models and techniques for enhancing student learning and engagement (Burns, 2017). Many instructors are hired with limited prior teaching experience. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has emerged as a practice that supports inquiry and assessment of teaching in higher education and: “SoTL is the systematic study of teaching and/or learning and the public sharing and review of such work through presentations, performance, or publications” (Poole & Simmons, 2013, p. 39). By its very nature, SoTL promotes collaboration because the shared results are expected to be interdisciplinarily applicable (McCarthy, 2008, p. 7).

This interdisciplinary approach is significant because in addition to a general lack of teaching expertise, faculty members and departments are well known to be isolated within departments and even from each other. Such “siloeing” (or isolation from others) in higher education can lead to a culture resistant to transformational change and growth (Lloyd, 2016, p. 607). On the other hand, organizations that foster a collaborative, cross-disciplinary culture, including institutions of higher education, also enhance professionalism and growth (Varagona, et al, p. 50). Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) have emerged from the principles of SoTL as a means for faculty to build community while assessing their own teaching effectiveness and sharing their results with others (Burns, 2017).

Fostering such a collaborative, high-quality teaching culture is of particular relevance at a community college, where student demographics range widely and teaching is the primary role for faculty members. According to a report from the American Association of Community

Colleges (AACC), in order for community colleges to continue to fulfill their mission of providing affordable, accessible education in the face of the rapid cultural and economic changes taking place in society, “collaboration at entirely new levels, among internal and external entities, will be essential” (AACC, 2012). To serve their students effectively, community college faculty would benefit from increased collaboration across, among, and within disciplines.

### **Context and questions**

My role as Faculty Development Director at a Johnson County Community College (JCCC), a large, suburban community college, requires that I assess faculty professional development needs and provide programming to meet those needs. Helping faculty to learn how to design valuable, high quality learning opportunities for students, as well keeping them informed about effective, evidence-based teaching strategies, is essential in faculty development. This includes striving towards developing a culture of collaboration across disciplines and across campus. The campus culture at JCCC is sometimes divided, many faculty members feel isolated, and there is insufficient communication among departments.

This *internal* divisiveness within higher education is not unique to JCCC, even while the institution of higher education itself is under *external* attack, including budget cuts, negative societal perceptions, and political anxiety (Fingerhut, 2018). In order for students, parents, and all constituents to maintain faith in the importance of higher education, colleges and universities would benefit from demonstrating a united front. Never has collaboration and improving college teacher effectiveness been more important. Promoting collaboration and unifying our institutions could potentially strengthen the role of higher education in society. Using the foundational principles of SoTL to guide the initiation and implementation of FLCs could be an effective way to do this (Baldwin & Chang).

This study seeks to answer the question: In what ways can the implementation of SoTL practices through Faculty Learning Communities in the community college promote improved pedagogical practices and foster collaboration?

Although the related concepts of Action Research and Professional Learning Communities are well established in the K-12 professional development world, SoTL in higher education is a relatively new, but growing field, and Faculty Learning Communities are emerging at colleges and universities all over the world (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014; King, 1992). Some have been doing it for up to three decades; others are in the beginning stages. Proponents and implementers of the strategies are enthusiastic and eager to share their knowledge and experience. This study will add to the growing body of research surrounding the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Faculty Learning Communities, with an emphasis on community colleges.

The mission of the community college is to provide open, affordable access to education, and the task of community college faculty is to teach (Twombly & Townsend, 2008). Community college faculty members are expected to have expertise in their discipline, but they are not expected to research or publish within the discipline, as are their university counterparts. Rather, they are judged “on the strength of their ability to help students learn and to engage students with different backgrounds, ethnicities, and aspirations” (Shannon & Smith, 2006, p. 15). They are highly qualified scholars, and if their professional setting does not require them to pursue research within their discipline itself, it would make sense for them turn their professional skills towards the best, most effective means of teaching their subject matter. In other words, community college teachers are well-positioned to become leaders and innovators in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. They are rigorously trained in their discipline, they have entered a professional situation in which teaching their subject matter is the primary focus of their job, yet they “rarely have the opportunities to share their

pedagogical work with others” (Latz, para. 15). The SoTL movement is an opportunity for community college faculty to emerge as leading scholars in the field of teaching excellence in higher education.

Unfortunately, in spite of the emphasis on teaching in the community college, instructors tend to be lacking in innovation and effectiveness in their teaching (Burns, 2017). Like most teachers in higher education, they have little training in pedagogy or andragogy, but rather an emphasis on their discipline or subject (Miller-Young, Yeo, & Manarin). Community college faculty members have limited opportunity to consult or collaborate with each other, and instructors design their courses individually, often relying on trial-and-error methods, and unsystematically evaluating their effectiveness through personal reflection (Worthy, 2016). Integrating SoTL principles into the community college setting could potentially transform the role of community college faculty within the academy, to become “experts knowledgeable in the complex processes of teaching diverse students” (Burns, 2017, p. 154). Sperling (2003) discussed implementation of SoTL at the community college level, noting that “this new ‘scholarship’ encourages faculty to understand themselves both as practitioners who can utilize research to enhance practice and researchers who can contribute to their profession through significant practice-based research” (p. 593). The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning represents a paradigm shift through which community college faculty members (and their institutions) can view their role within the academy to create a dynamic connection between pedagogical/andragogical research and on-the-ground classroom teaching. Because SoTL requires researchers to share and make public their results, this paradigm shift will require an expansion and reconceptualization of the community college mission to support externally oriented scholarship. Community college faculty members might have the expertise and experience to study these questions, but they would need institutional, cultural, and ideological support to conduct the research and share

the results of their findings with their colleagues at colleges and universities (Worthy, 2016).

Community college faculty and administrators need not limit their professional participation to serving on boards of academic organizations and publications focused only on the community college; they can be included in those organizations and publications focused on all undergraduate teaching.

Through the principles of SoTL, community colleges could potentially play an influential role in improving teaching effectiveness at all levels of higher education. But while SoTL is gaining momentum at universities, progress at the community college is slower. Little is written and there are few models for implementing SoTL at the community college level (Ford & Peaslee, 2018).

### **Overview of theory and method**

Collaboration Theory, the theoretical framework that underpins this research, requires a qualitative approach to data collection. The very nature of collaboration is unquantifiable and cannot be “measured.” Though the interactive process of collaboration (sometimes referred to as the “black box”) is not well understood, it is possible for researchers to understand and apply the five dimensions of collaboration: Collaborative Governing, Collaborative Administration, Reconciling Individual and Collective Interests, Forging Mutually Beneficial Relationships, and Building Social Capital Norms (Thomson & Perry, 2006, pp. 24-27). Analyzing data through this framework requires attention to meaning within context. Thus, the qualitative method, which focuses on context and the natural world, is interpretive and allows meaning to emerge rather than imposing meaning on inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), and is well-suited to the study of collaboration.

More specifically, this descriptive study consists illustrative cases of individuals who are implementing SoTL practices at their institutions and examined as a larger case study, focusing on a “bounded system,” understanding the data through interpretation as an active

participant/observer, not a true “partner” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). The study is comprised of three individual interviews, followed with a focus group comprised of the interviewees. This open-ended, qualitative approach allowed for themes and patterns to emerge organically, with limited preconceived expectations on the researcher’s part.

The data was collected virtually, through email and online interviews and meetings. The interviewees were chosen based on their experience with SoTL, FLCs, and type of institution (i.e., community or technical college). The interviews and focus group were transcribed and analyzed following Marshall and Rossman’s (2016) template (p. 217-218).

In addition to the interviews, the researcher reviewed copies of administrative documents relevant to the planning, implementation, and assessment of SoTL initiatives at the respective institutions. The content of these documents was reviewed and coded (similar to interview transcription coding) in order to present relevant similarities, differences, and perspectives that may be unique to a specific institution. A complete picture of the methodology is found in Chapter 3.

### **Organization of the dissertation**

Following this introduction is a review of current literature which situates this study within the focus of the research: culture and climate of higher education institutions, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and Faculty Learning Communities. In addition, the literature review will provide background and information on Collaboration Theory, the conceptual framework through which data will be analyzed.

Chapter Three explains the research methodology and provides more background on the theoretical framework that guides the study. The chapter also includes a discussion of methods for collecting and analyzing data.

Chapter Four describes the data analysis and reports the findings. This chapter features how three different community colleges are implementing SoTL at their institutions.

Chapter Five discusses conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future studies.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

### Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

SoTL originates with Boyer (1991), who classified the scholarly activities associated with SoTL into four categories: discovery (traditionally what the academy labels as “research”), integration (connecting across disciplines), application or engagement (making teaching publicly available for other scholars), and teaching. He further identified three teaching approaches: effective teaching, scholarly teaching, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Shulman (2000) later defined effective teaching as any teaching that results in student learning, a scholarly grounding in a specific field, and “that which occurs when our work as teachers becomes public, peer-reviewed, and critiqued, and exchanged with other members of our professional communities.” (Miller, et al., 2004, p. 31-32).

There are compelling reasons for the implementation of SoTL. Draeger (2013) argued that SoTL helps students learn more effectively and gives teachers the tools they need to share their disciplinary expertise. It also offers instructors opportunities for professional and intellectual growth, builds interdisciplinary communities that invigorates intellectual capital. It not only enhances the institution’s policy making, it “embodies a spirit of pedagogical innovation that enlivens the quest for learning and reminds us why it is worth pursuing” (Draeger, 2013, p. 6).

Cassard and Sloboda (2014) offered a model for supporting the shift to a new paradigm that promotes SoTL and promotes faculty and administrative buy-in. They suggest that if colleges and universities create a strong and focused research agenda in SoTL, they’ll be in a position to provide the assessments of student learnings and evidence of learning outcomes that are more and more in demand from stakeholders.

Hatch (2005) argued for integrating SoTL into the classroom. Teaching is often solitary and quite personal, and it's not unusual for educators to feel reluctant to have their peers observe or judge them; yet the profession suffers when teachers are not collaborative and open to sharing with each other. Making teaching more public in a collaborative environment could generate a culture that fosters SoTL. Hatch (2005) offers five recommendations to create more open communication, information sharing, and collegiality:

1. Documenting and representing what teachers actually do in the classroom;
2. Establishing new forums for the presentation, publication, and review of teachers' work;
3. Creating an audience for teachers' work and building the collective capacity to interpret and assess what goes on in the classroom;
4. Implementing standards that recognize and encourage teachers' professionalism; and,
5. Developing new standards that support federal mandates for improving teaching quality.

### **Faculty Learning Communities**

Cox (2004) established the widely accepted definition and protocol for a Faculty Learning Community within the parameters of SoTL:

“a cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group of six to fifteen members (eight to twelve members is the recommended size) who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building.” (Cox, 2004, p. 8)

It could be argued that the idea for Faculty Learning Communities can be connected to John Dewey's ideas about learning in communities that are student-centered (Dewey, 1933). These principles have successfully been transferred to faculty, with the evolution and implementation of Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) at the college level.

FLCs can be either cohort-based (focusing on a particular group of faculty and staff) or topic-based (focused on a specific teaching need or issue). The curriculum is more “structured and intensive” than in more traditional faculty groups, such as learning circles or brownbag discussions (Cox, 2004, p. 9). Participants are expected to explore deeply and to assess the outcomes of their topics.

FLCs are proven to be effective for varied purposes. Bond (2015) describes the benefits of offering FLCs to non-tenure track faculty. Gordon and Futz (2015) used FLCs to explore the most effective ways to conduct their campus-wide first-year seminars. At a university in the United Arab Emirates, Engin & Atkinson (2015) report the model worked effectively to support curriculum changes. FLCs are well-documented to be useful in STEM teaching and learning (Smith, et al., 2008) (Elliot et al., 2016). A case-study conducted by Schlitz, et al. (2009) describes how their FLC fostered a “culture of assessment” on their campus, and Becket, et al., (2012) used an FLC to reflect on and implement service-learning goals. Notably, FLCs are proven to be effective in fostering collaboration. FLCs can help overcome “pedagogical solitude” (Tovar, et al., 2015). Participants describe how the “energy level and focus” of a well-run FLC can increase motivation and engagement (Schlitz et al., 2009).

Regardless of the stated purpose for the FLC, it would appear that one consistent outcome of most FLCs is some form of enhanced collaboration, whether through a campus-wide policy change, an increase in collaboration among the participating colleagues, or even a institutional cultural shift. Thus a more formal examination of the effects of FLCs on collaboration is useful for those wishing to foster a collaborative environment in higher education. Understanding the nature of collaboration itself is an important part of this process.

## **Collaboration Theory**

Because the principles of SoTL and FLCs require public sharing and cross-disciplinary collaborations, the use of Collaboration Theory is an appropriate and apt framework for examining their effects on college teaching and culture. Understanding how collaboration works is enigmatic and difficult to quantify. A number of researchers have sought to formulate a pragmatic theory of collaboration. Wood and Gray (1991) shaped a theory of collaboration in “Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Collaboration.” The authors analyzed nine research-based studies that addressed several theoretical perspectives on the collaboration process. Their article identified theoretical questions that are raised, and in answering them developed the beginnings of a theory of collaboration.

Their first effort was to develop a definition for the phenomenon of collaboration. After comparing and analyzing the different ways the articles define collaboration, they integrated them into the following definition: “Collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain” (p. 146). They further defined another element of the theory—to clarify the role of the “convener” in a collaborative process (p. 149). The convener establishes and guides the collaboration, but questions remain about how the convener gains and uses the authority to do so, whether through legitimation, facilitation, mandate, or persuasion. They address “environmental complexity” (p. 155); most organizations seek to reduce uncertainty and turmoil, yet collaboration tends to increase complexity and thus the turbulences in an organization’s environment. However the exchange of knowledge and information that can occur in collaboration “fosters an enriched appreciation of the problem” that can result in a kind of synergistic form of problem solving. They argue that the potential for the

participants in collaboration to receive some kind of benefit, whether individually or as a group, makes collaboration possible, but questions remain about the relationship between self-interests and collective interests.

Gajda (2004) developed the Strategic Alliance Formative Assessment Rubric (SAFAR) to help organizations “quantitatively and qualitatively self-assess” the strength of their collaborative efforts (p. 76). The rubric draws from five principles of collaboration theory: “(1) collaboration is imperative... (2) collaboration is known by many names... (3) collaboration is journey and not a destination... (4) with collaboration the personal is as important as the procedural...and (5) collaboration develops in stages (pp.67-69). Gajda’s (2004) theory supplements, but does not emerge directly from the work of Wood and Gray.

Montiel-Overall (2009) drew on the work of Wood & Gray (1991), along with constructivists such as Dewey and Vygotsky, to develop the framework for Collaboration Theory, offering a model that encourages educators to collaborate and integrate their different areas of knowledge into their teaching, arguing that “the synergy created...infuses instruction with new ideas.”

Taking a grounded approach to Collaboration Theory, Adair (2014) moved from the interorganizational or intergroup level to the interpersonal level, identifying six causal themes: turn-taking, observing or doing, building group cohesion, influencing others, organizing work, and status seeking, which were further organized into two categories—Individual First and Team First (p. 68; Jenab, 2017). Kerrigan’s (2015) systematic literature review concluded that collaborating organizations must be aligned in their goals and culturally compatible.

Communication, both formally and informally, is necessary for effective collaboration (p. 7).

Given and Kelly (2016) looked beyond individual behaviors within a group and attempted to study “the collectivist, social nature of group activities” (p. 2). The researchers studied the members of mentoring circles, and found that the “diverse demographic profile” of the circles allows for “diverse experiences and a broad range of information sharing opportunities beyond what individual members would typically encounter” (p. 9). The cohesive nature of the groups allowed members from a variety of backgrounds to collaborate effectively.

Beginning to bridge the connection between the more practical to the theoretical, Thomson & Perry (2006) elaborated on the “black box” of collaboration. They urged looking “inside the black box of collaboration processes... [to] find a complex construct consisting of five variable dimensions” (p. 21). In order to collaborate effectively, it is necessary to understand the five dimensions: The Process of Collaborative Governing, The Process of Collaborative Administration, The Process of Reconciling Individual and Collective Interests, The Process of Forging Mutually Beneficial Relationships, and The Process of Building Social Capital Norms (pp. 24-27). They cautioned against “collaborating for collaboration’s sake” or for individual gain because the “complexity of the collaboration process” (p. 28) would likely result in failure. While the interactive process of collaboration is least understood (the “black box”), it nonetheless necessary for facilitators and change agents to understand and apply the five dimensions of collaboration.

Stavrakis (2009) ventured more deeply into the theoretical, attempting to bridge “the philosophical gap between modern and postmodern theories of understanding reality, knowledge, and social practice in the context of human collaboration and communication” (p. 16). The author pointed out that there is not a “complete body of knowledge or an ontological framework” to support either theoretical or methodological levels of collaborative practice” (p. 17) and hence

attempted to establish one. Stavrakis also addressed the black box, and described the actant's role therein as the creative individual whose cognitive experiences are "influenced by bodily, biologically driven, senses, but are seen as black boxes and therefore we cannot speak of their true inner being" (p. 183). This irrational process is associated with creativity, yet the creator is not able to explain that process.

The process of understanding the essential structure of a context is to observe without being directly involved in the process of collaboration; and thus: Recognize the individuals, Examine the individuals, Record interactions among individuals, Identify strong links, Identify adversaries and contributors, Construct basic outline of the context, and Record connectivity and identify possible purposes (Stavrakis, pp. 262-263).

The synthesis of the studies, illustrates that collaboration is a synergistic process through which the sum becomes greater than its parts that can be a powerful force of change and growth within an organization.

## **Conclusion**

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning supports inquiry and assessment of teaching in higher education. Faculty Learning Communities not only create opportunities to conduct this inquiry and assessment, they help build community and cultivate collaboration. This study seeks to understand in what ways can the implementation of SoTL practices through Faculty Learning Communities in the community college promote improved pedagogical practices and foster collaboration.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

#### Purpose

This qualitative study examined the illustrative cases of three individuals who are implementing SoTL practices at their institutions and were examined as a larger case study of three different community colleges and the ways they have implemented SoTL practices with their faculty. These illustrative cases were then examined as a larger case study, seeking to answer the question:

In what ways can the implementation of SoTL practices through Faculty

Learning Communities promote improved pedagogical practices and foster collaboration?

Alongside the three illustrative cases, I position my own case study of implementing SoTL practices at the community college where I am the faculty development director. Investigating other's experiences has assisted me in recognizing the potential value that Faculty Learning Communities offer. I am in the early stages of my position and speaking with colleagues from other institutions has provided me with a valuable perspective and insight as I move forward with introducing the concepts of SoTL and FLCs to the faculty. The successes and failures they describe will influence and inform the choices I make and the understanding that I have of faculty needs and faculty development.

The theoretical framework that underpins this research requires a qualitative approach to data collection. The very nature of collaboration is unquantifiable and thus can't be "measured." The qualitative method, which focuses on context and the natural world, is interpretive and allows meaning to emerge rather than imposing meaning on an inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), is well-suited to the study of collaboration.

Case study is an appropriate methodology for this study because, according to Yin (2014), it is a research strategy that is useful in contexts that call for the "distinctive need...to

understand complex social phenomena” in a contemporary, real-world situation (p. 3). Because SoTL is an emerging practice, the study of it takes place in real time. The descriptive multiple case studies focus on a “bounded system,” understanding the data through interpretation as an active participant/observer (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). The researcher selected three real-life cases to examine in depth. These three illustrative cases were also part of a larger “case” that studied the integration of SoTL in faculty professional development at community colleges. The cases were defined through the ways that the three different community colleges implemented SoTL.

## Participants

Each illustrative case involved faculty development professionals at the community college level implementing SoTL practices using some version of Cox's (2004) model for Faculty Learning Communities developed from the tenets of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

Community College A included two participants, a faculty member and an administrator. Melinda is a non-tenure status full-time instructor in the English department. She teaches two courses a semester, which is half her teaching load; she gets credit release for the other half so that she can coordinate the SoTL program. Sarah is the college's Vice President of Academic & Student Affairs. While she does not have hands-on involvement in the SoTL program, she helped to initiate and implement the program, and is able to allocate funding for the project.

Josh is a full-time instructor in the Spanish Department at Community College B. In his role as instructor, he became involved with the institution's Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) and eventually took the job of coordinator there, which allowed him release time from teaching one class per semester. Recently, he took over as director of the TLC, which also allows one class release per semester.

Nancy from Community College C is a full-time faculty member in the English Department. She and a chemistry professor are co-coordinators of their SoTL program. They have a five class per semester teaching load, and each receive "reassign time" which releases them from teaching two classes per semester.

Finally, as researcher and participant, I am both peer and student in this process. In addition to my role as a doctoral student researching SoTL and FLCs, I am simultaneously serving as the director of Faculty Development at my institution. It is a full-time, administrative

position. Although I do not have faculty status, as part of my job description, I teach one class per semester in the. At one time, the college had a Center for Teaching and Learning, but it was eliminated some years ago. However, space and resources have been allocated to create a new CTL next year.

### **Distinguishing Roles**

In my role as research practitioner, it was important to conduct ethical research while accounting for the similarity in my role with that of the interview subjects. In my position as faculty development director at my institution, I might be interested in implementing programs similar to those that I studied. Yet the questions that I asked were from an information-gathering perspective. As a researcher, I attempted to gain genuine insight into the effectiveness of the programs offered at their respective institutions. Therefore I asked open-ended questions, inviting participants to draw freely on their experiences rather than attempting to guide them towards an anticipated result. Because of my lack of experience in offering SoTL programs on my own campus, I was able to distinguish my dual role as researcher and practitioner by allowing the interview subjects to offer their own conclusions on their own experiences with limited bias on my part. In Chapter 4, the Findings section of the dissertation, I will offer my own perspective and commentary on the emergent themes *in italics*.

### **Data collection methods**

The data collection method included semi-structured interviews, followed up with a focus group involving all of the participants (See Appendix A). The interviewees have experience in facilitating SoTL and Faculty Learning Communities within their respective community colleges. Interviews were collected in February 2019, with individual sessions lasting 40-50 minutes, and were recorded using the recording feature on Zoom, an online communication

application. Immediately after each interview, the interview content was transcribed verbatim. Faculty development professionals from community colleges in Minnesota, Massachusetts, and North Carolina participated in the study. Each of these institutions is in varying stages of implementing programs in support of faculty participating in SoTL. Following these individual interviews, participants joined in a virtual focus group discussion via Zoom, which was transcribed verbatim following the session.

In addition to the interviews, the researcher reviewed copies of administrative documents relevant to the planning, implementation, and assessment of SoTL initiatives at the respective institutions. The content of these documents was reviewed and coded (similar to interview transcription coding) in order to present relevant similarities, differences, and perspectives that may be unique to the specific institution.

### **Theoretical framework and data analysis**

This study's theoretical framework requires a systematic and careful analysis of the collaboration process. Thomson & Perry's (2006) five dimensions include two that are structural (governing and administering), two of social capital (mutuality and norms), and one of agency (autonomy), which together "signify collaborative action" (p. 24).

The *governing* dimension requires that those seeking to collaborate must be able to make decisions jointly about how to govern behavior and relationships, and how to build processes for reaching agreement through shared power. The process should have a non-hierarchical structure that allows for group consensus and openness in information sharing. But though the collaboration process does not thrive in an authoritative structure, it is nonetheless not a self-administering process. Collaboration presupposes the need or desire for achieving a purpose, and in order to accomplish that purpose an *administering* structure is necessary. This structure

is what moves the process from governance to action. The “presence (or absence) of clear roles and responsibilities, the capacity, to set boundaries, the presence of concrete achievable, goals, and good communication” are key for successful collaborative experiences (p. 25).

Without appropriate structure it is difficult for humans to collaborate, but without humans, collaboration is impossible. It is not enough for collaborators just to share information, without *mutuality* collaboration cannot succeed. Mutually beneficial interdependency, whether based on different or complementary interests, is the foundation for effective collaboration. The *norms* of this mutual reciprocity, along with trust (the belief among groups of individuals that another group behaves in good faith and with honesty) must be fostered as central factors in collaboration.

The human factor is, of course, a complicating factor. Participants in a collaborative endeavor have a kind of dual role wherein they maintain their own separate identity while simultaneously connecting with the collaborative identity, a tension between self-interest and collective interest. This paradoxical *autonomy* can both hinder and enliven the collaboration process and must be managed effectively for productive collaboration to occur. These five dimensions were applied to a thematic content analysis of the data, searching for themes with broad patterns of meaning, and defining these. These themes function as deductive codes from the research literature.

Data was also analyzed using inductive codes. After data collection and thorough data immersion, in vivo and axial coding was used to uncover codes that emerged from the content of the raw data. The codes were entered into a qualitative data analysis software (QDA Miner) to gain a visual representation of the data analysis process. Graphs 1 and 2 illustrate the narrowing

of these codes in Appendix B. This bottom up approach allowed the themes to arise that focused the scope of the study and the bounding of the cases.

Data analysis followed Marshall and Rossman's (2016) template (p. 217-218).

1. **Data Organization**—As data was collected, it was organized systematically as it was accumulated and entered into QDA Miner, a software program designed to analyze qualitative data.
2. **Data Immersion**—The process of transcribing the data was itself be deeply immersive, along with the reading and re-reading inherent in the process.
3. **Coding the Data**—Theory-generated codes and in vivo codes were used to code the data. Deductive and inductive coding strategies were used; deductive codes came from the research literature and inductive codes came from the data itself.
4. **Analytic Memos**—Once coding was complete and clusters and subclusters were identified; notes, reflections, thoughts, and insights began the transformational process of discovering what the data was revealing. The memos led to the cyclical generation of case summaries, categories, themes, typologies, matrices, and clusters. As themes developed and emerged, integrative interpretation of the data (beginning to “tell the story”) evolved (Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p. 222).
5. **Alternative Understandings**— In order to avoid researcher bias, a thorough self-check will involved triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, audit trails, and intercoder reliability (p. 230).
6. **Writing the Report**—Presentation of the results of the study, as determined by the cyclical process described above.

Interviews are well-known as an effective method for gathering data in qualitative research, but conducting the interview requires the researcher to develop more than just a friendly conversation and a rapport with the subjects. Skillful analysis of the interviews is essential, and the coding process is an effective technique to mine the data found within the interview.

Codes are units of meaning, words, phrases, or paragraphs, that arise across the data collected (Yi, 2018). In order to determine emergent themes from the data, the researcher used inductive coding to find meaning within the data. This type of heuristic or exploratory research requires that the researcher doesn't begin with codes; but rather, searches for connections among ideas and themes within the data that shape themselves into codes.

The initial coding took place rather quickly. I read and listened to the interview transcripts carefully to check for accuracy. This process established a deep familiarity with the text. After completing these careful reads, I wrote down my general impressions of what the overall data looked like, and very broad codes began to emerge.

I then began the process of line-by-line coding. I examined the data thoroughly with a closer eye for details. At this stage, I developed many codes, many more than I knew would be feasible for my study, but with the assumption that these codes would eventually cohere into broader, more meaningful units. After I completed this line-by-line coding, I assessed the rather miscellaneous jumble of codes and looked for areas of categorization. I looked for similar codes, sorted them into categories that represented comprehensive, inclusive themes, and within those themes, I began to see the data shape itself into a meaningful portrayal narrative connecting the illustrative cases I was examining. The themes reflected in the categorization of these codes emerged as a way to make sense of the data within the context of my research question. I

entered the codes into qualitative data analysis software (QDA Miner) to gain a visual representation of the data analysis process. The graphs in Appendix B illustrate the narrowing of these codes.

This qualitative study takes a multifaceted, exploratory approach towards researching the characteristics and outcomes of SoTL and FLCs at the community college level. This open-ended, qualitative approach allows for themes and patterns to emerge organically. Viewed through the lens of Collaboration Theory, this study seeks to broaden the research and understanding of the ways that the implementation of SoTL through FLCs can promote improved pedagogical practices and foster collaboration.

### **Limitations**

This qualitative study has several limitations. First, the study was confined to participants to who were implementing SoTL programs at their institutions, and their desire to create successful experiences for faculty, and for themselves, may have influenced their perception and explication of the outcomes of the programs offered. It cannot be assumed that the faculty members participating in these programs had the same perceptions. Second, the study relies on participants to accurately reflect on their experience and reflections. The data collection was derived indirectly through retrospection and not observed directly. It is possible that the subjects created meaning during the interview process that differed from their actual experience. Third, the results of this study cannot be assumed to correspond with the results of similar studies of the perceptions of other faculty development professionals who have offered SoTL programs at their institutions. The participants have a variety of experience and background in offering SoTL opportunities to their faculty. Finally, because of the small sample size, the results are not easily generalizable to other studies. Despite these limitations, the

experiences and observations that the participants share offer much to learn about the effects of SoTL in the community college setting.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### Case Studies

This chapter will feature how three different community colleges are implementing SoTL at their institutions. It features the voices of the professors and faculty development professionals from these institutions doing this work. Alongside these three case studies, I will offer myself as an illustrative case study. In my role as director of faculty development at Johnson County Community college, my position is similar to that of my subjects. First, each of the individual cases, Community College A, Community College B, and Community College C, and my own institutions is described; following that is an exploration of the themes that emerged from the data, as well as an analysis of how these themes sit within the framework of Collaboration Theory.

#### **Community College A.**

Community College A is a two-campus college located outside Minneapolis, Minnesota, with an enrollment of approximately 7,800 students and approximately 300 full- and part-time faculty. Many of the students are first generation and eligible for financial aid, yet according to their website only 21 percent are from “diverse backgrounds.” The institution was founded in 1965 and includes both transfer programs as well as certificate programs. The college also offers continuing education for working adults. The second campus, approximately 30 miles away from the original one, was established in 1978. Like many other community colleges, the college also offers classes at other off-site locations throughout the neighboring communities. Community College A is a commuter campus, and there are no residence halls or student housing available.

Although the college does not have a formalized faculty development structure such as a Center for Teaching and Learning, Melinda, a full-time faculty member in the English department, and Sarah, an upper-level administrator, collaborated to offer a professional development opportunity for their faculty. Originally calling it the Applied Research Initiative, they were looking for a way to encourage faculty members to examine their own teaching while also modeling research practices for their students. They looked for other community colleges offering similar programs, but were unable to find any. That was when they discovered that universities were already promoting this kind of research under the name of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Melinda, 2019, Personal Interview). The institution studied programs at several universities on which to model their own SoTL program, and in 2014 they offered their inaugural “Scholars Program.” A flyer promoting the program says that the Scholars Program “brings together faculty from across disciplines and experience to participate in a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) faculty learning community. [F]aculty are supported as they develop, implement, and present research results at a conference or in a journal.” They call for applicants who are “interested in improving the teaching and student learning experience.” The five selected faculty members meet for a one-day retreat in August, and then monthly “to continue progress, share ideas, collaborate, and to obtain consultation and support.” Their SoTL Scholars Program is a 2-year commitment, and participants receive a semester stipend as well as funding to attend a teaching and learning conference.

The program is administered by Melinda, a full-time faculty member who receives release time from two courses per semester to coordinate the program. The concept of SoTL was new and not widely understood at the institution, but awareness is growing as the first two cohorts have completed and the application process for the third cohort has begun, faculty

interest is evident. Applicants have about a month to apply, and typically ten or more apply for each of the cohorts, which have been limited to five members. “So that’s really good,” says Melinda, “that we’ve had more people than spots available.” This is significant because often it is difficult to elicit faculty participation and enthusiasm for professional development activities offered to them, particularly if there is not a strong supplementary financial incentive. Sarah believes that the way they promote the program accounts for the interest from faculty. “I think it’s a partnership between administration and faculty,” she says. “I try to give Melinda the stage because I think it’s received much better when it comes from full-time faculty. Faculty just don’t want something that administration is shoving down their throat” (Sarah, 2019, Personal Interview).

Faculty perception of who or what is behind the program extends to more than just who is offering it. Although the promotional flyer calling for applicants refers to participation in a faculty learning community, they have chosen not to use that label broadly because of past faculty perceptions. “As an institution, we did Student Learning Communities for a number of years,” said Sarah. “I think there would be unfortunately a negative connotation for some folks that would not necessarily be warranted, so we don’t call them Faculty Learning Communities.” Despite the name change, the groups generally do follow the Cox (2004) model. “We don’t necessarily call it something specific other than cohort, but this is a scholarly program,” said Melinda.

The cohorts are selected with attention towards discipline diversity. “We have been really intentional about that,” said Sarah. “We make sure that we’re not just all the psychology department faculty, for example. We also have some occupational programs. We’ve had a number of physical therapist assistant faculty that have gone through.” The diversity in the

cohorts has fostered an observable effect on collaboration as they are true “communities of practice...where they have those conversations to help strengthen one another.” The organizers believe that five is an ideal number so that there are enough members to bring different levels of expertise and experience, but few enough to make sure it is meaningful for everybody. Resources also play a part, as Sarah noted that five is the number that they are financially able to sustain realistically each year.

The first semester of the program is devoted to educating the participants about SoTL, helping them define their research question, with the benchmark for the end of the first semester to have submitted their IRB application for approval. The program offers support from the college’s Office of Institutional Research in developing and submitting their IRB. In addition, librarians offer support in researching for the literature review. Because participants have different levels of experience in academic research, “there’s lots of conversation and lots of sharing,” Melinda said. “Yes, it’s redundant in a lot of sessions, because there’s multiple places you have to repeat the same information, but it’s very intentional in its purpose.” The monthly meetings provide an opportunity for an accountability of sorts, as members are encouraged to articulate their goals, discuss their processes, and report out on what they’ve accomplished. Melinda works with them one-on-one throughout the semester, previewing and providing feedback on their IRB applications so that when they get to the IRB board, “if there are any red flags, we’ve anticipated them and have either mitigated anything that we can do to either eliminate it or be proactive in our approach so that there aren’t any huge hang-ups.”

The second semester is devoted to data collection, “which you would think would be this reprieve, but it’s actually not because we actually just taught this last week, and now they’re collecting data,” said Melinda. Much of the semester is spent assisting faculty members with

determining what they will do with their data once they collect it. In addition to Melinda, a faculty member from the math department who was a member of the first cohort voluntarily helps with analyzing and interpreting statistical data. Participants are encouraged to look outside the cohort for support as well. “One of the things we talk about is who are the people that you know on campus that you can access as a resources,” said Melinda. “Who can you utilize on campus? And that’s been fun with our cross-disciplinary teams, because, for example, we had somebody in the math department help one of our English faculty in the program create all of the charts that will go with her presentation...and just to have that...these faculty might not have engaged.” Sarah added, “And that’s definitely the focus of the program, and I think that the thing that lots of institutions struggle with is how do you actually help faculty to collaborate with one another?”

She continued:

It’s a very personal relationship that the faculty members have with their students. They go into the classroom. And what happens in that classroom for the most part is really pretty much just between that faculty member and the students. [They] don’t know how what [they’re] doing is different than what somebody else is doing.... So this is part of the overall offerings that we have in trying to help faculty to realize [that they] can do something in the classroom. [They] can change things, assess the effectiveness of that and actually see impact of it, and then hopefully replicate that.... This isn’t a one-shot deal, it is the only time [they are] going do the SoTL program, but how do [they] continue to evolve teaching and utilizing contacts with departments and across campus to actually make that happen?

These connections can help faculty to consider ways in which they teach classes that can

help students be more successful. “Good teaching is good teaching, that transcends disciplines,” said Melinda. The lessons learned in the SoTL cohort can be applied regardless of content area. She reflected on the faculty who had recently returned from a teaching and learning conference, and noted that three faculty from three different disciplines (math, biology, and physical therapy) were talking about a strategy that they learned at the conference that they were each applying to their respective areas. “It was so exciting for them to talk about,” she said. “And I think that really solidifies the transferability of teaching strategy, when you’ve got them cross-disciplinary.”

Once they’ve collected and analyzed their data, participants have the following year to write up their results. At the beginning of the semester, during the second fall retreat, the cohort from the previous year joins them to share about their studies, words of wisdom, and lessons learned. This has proven to be a useful process, which cohorts have described as “incredibly valuable, just knowing somebody’s gone through it, some very practical advice they can take away, give them kind of a bigger picture of how all the pieces of the program fit together.” By the end of fall semester, participants are expected to submit an abstract. “A lot of the faculty, at least that have gone through the program, haven’t had to write a formal abstract,” Melinda said. They don’t realize that “even if they don’t have their finite conclusions from their study, they can still write the abstract based on the initial analysis.” The final product, then, is due spring semester. Participants have an opportunity to pilot their presentation or article at an in-house faculty symposium in May, with the expectation that they will seek to publish in a SoTL journal or present at a teaching and learning conference outside the college.

The cross-disciplinary connections that result from participation in the SoTL cohort can do more than improve a teacher’s classroom effectiveness, they can promote transformational

change within the entire organization. “Don't tell anyone, but that's really what we're talking about here,” said Melinda. She noted that there have been times of great contention at the college, between faculty administration, between departments, and between the college's two campuses. “Part of this is that the greater connections you can make between faculty for good helps them when things get tough,” she said. So, for example, when there is some kind of unrest about something going on in one department, faculty members will know someone personally to go talk to and ask about what is actually happening rather than participating in uninformed rumors and speculation.

Another benefit to the collaborative relationships built in the SoTL cohorts is that faculty can develop awareness of their role within the institution that can lead to improved student success. “Oftentimes people go to the things that they are not in control to change. They'll want to say ‘academic advising really needs to do x, y, and z,’” said Sarah. But having a broader picture of the organization allows faculty to understand that they can have a role in the greater student success conversation on campus. “Every stakeholder has a different role at the institution, and you need to understand and focus on developing yours and not necessarily pointing fingers” said Sarah. “And that's a culture change that takes time.”

### **Community College B.**

Community College B is a seven-campus college located in the North Carolina's Research Triangle and serves over 19,000 students with approximately 500 full- and part-time faculty. Founded in 1961, the college offers career programs and university transfer programs. The seven campuses are spread across two counties, and the college also offers extensive online and hybrid opportunities. Minority students comprise a significant portion of enrollment,

making up approximately 55% of the student body. Sixty-nine percent of students are eligible for financial aid. Community College B is a commuter campus; student housing is not available.

The college's Teaching-Learning Center (TLC) was established in 1998, and is staffed by a director and a coordinator, both of whom are full-time faculty that receive one class release per semester plus a summer stipend to operate the TLC. The Center offers several "one-off" faculty development sessions a month on a variety of topics ranging from student advising to the school's learning management system. They offer a biennial in-house teaching and learning conference, alternating with a biennial in-house publication called *Learning Matters*.

Additionally, the Center facilitates FIGs, or Faculty Interest Groups, which are teams of four to five people, both faculty and staff, whose purpose is to "foster collaborations between faculty from a variety of teaching disciplines and staff from across campus, to encourage data-informed decision-making about classroom practices, and to improve student success" (citation). "We also include staff in these," said Josh (Josh, 2019, Personal Interview). "Staff have a helpful perspective a lot of the time." The guidelines for FIGs are inspired by the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education model, and are similar to but less formalized than the Cox model. The FIGs meet on a three semester cycle, "so it would sort of be like SoTL," Josh said. "[They] investigate for a semester, then [they] implement, and then [they] publish and wrap up in the third semester." The group meets four to five times per semester, and faculty appreciate the opportunity to find the time to do participate in the research. "People reiterate over and over about the FIGs, that the biggest thing it did was carve out the time and give accountability for faculty and staff to work on something together, some issue that they wanted to do but it just gets put aside because we all have a million things to do.... So [they're] accountable to [their] team." Faculty who participate in FIGs receive a \$100 stipend.

FIGs are comprised of members who are either interested in a specific course or a theme. Recently, for example, a group of science faculty were interested in scaffolding--they focused on the theme of scaffolding and explored how it could be applied in different courses. Faculty self-select to participate in FIGs that are of interest to them, but Josh is struggling with an upcoming possibility that administration might try to mandate some FIGs.. “We’re not prescribing them, but coming soon we’re having the guided pathways initiative and there’s a lot of worry about that,” Josh said. “I am going to meet with administration to see what to expect...are [they] going to mandate that the TLC do something? Are they going to want to try to do something [with FIGs] and maybe it doesn't go so well?” The possibility incites strong opinions. Some of his colleagues argue that “definitely no, that sounds crazy, FIGs are a core faculty interest and it should not be prescriptive at all.” Others have advised him to “get ahead of it...If we’re going to have to do this [we] want faculty involved [with the guided pathways initiative].” Josh is concerned with the effects of administration involving itself: “I don’t want to taint the FIGs brand at [Community College B] if it goes wrong,” he said. “That’s my fear....people will say... ‘Faculty are burning out. They might not want to do this [because administration] doesn’t know what [they’re] doing with these pathways, so why would faculty want to be involved?’”

Unlike the FIGs, the college’s SoTL program is more of a solitary endeavor. Faculty can apply for support to study “what is happening in their own classrooms as opposed to outside researchers who lack sufficient knowledge of the context, discipline, or student populations researching teaching and learning to suit their [the researcher’s] own purposes.” SoTL participants are expected to “publish their work and results in an effort to contribute to the academic field of teaching and learning in post-secondary education.” Full-time instructors receive “mini-sabbaticals,” which release them from up to eight credit hours for a three-semester

commitment; part-time instructors receive a \$500 stipend upon completion of their SoTL project. Although collaborative SoTL projects are encouraged, according to TLC director Josh, thus far faculty members have opted only to do solo projects.

None of these faculty development opportunities are mandatory, yet a new policy from administration requires that faculty participate in at least five hours of faculty development per year. “People were up in arms about [the mandatory requirement], but you can count pretty much anything,” said Josh. “Nothing in the TLC is required.”

Despite this flexibility, professional development seems to be perceived as a top-down directive, and interest in the SoTL program has waned recently because of low morale in the institution. “People feel very stressed out and overburdened lately because there was an extra class we had to teach. It wasn’t really according to our contracts but it felt like it was.... people just felt very burned out,” said Josh. He said that SoTL is typically perceived as extra work and that it has been difficult to get faculty involved, but that he has been attempting to give it a different image. “I’m trying to spin it as renewal, and that’s what it should be,” he said.

Josh has only been in the position of director of the TLC for a few months, and despite his own faculty status, he has encountered some resistance from faculty. He has been attempting to market professional development opportunities to faculty. He surveyed faculty and had the goal to visit each department to discuss their interests and needs but “some departments didn’t want me to come...to their meetings. I came to the chairs meeting which was not ideal. I sent them a marketing email about here’s what we do. I haven’t gotten the results from all that yet.”

Despite this seeming resistance to the offerings of the TLC, Josh has noticed that the activities faculty participate in do produce a “ripple effect of collaboration.” He cites the SoTL program as an example that produced collaboration because it allowed faculty members to

become experts on a topic. For example, one faculty member did a study on plagiarism, and after completing the study he is now perceived as an expert on campus, made many presentations to colleagues on the topic, and was consulted by administration and asked to play a part in setting their academic integrity policy. “It keeps snowballing and rolling afterward,” he said. Josh has observed this snowball effect in other situations. For example, another faculty member started out in a FIG on student motivation, and she was inspired to extend that research to do a SoTL project on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and increasing motivation in online courses.

He has also observed the beneficial effect of people making bridges across disciplines, including opportunities for transfer and technical faculty to connect. “People need to know what happens in other departments,” he said. “If we know what other people are doing we can talk more intelligently about it, and then also be involved in it and hopefully shape where it’s going.” He believes that even the “one-off” sessions that the TLC offers foster collegiality through stress relief and social connection. “That’s a big part of what we do,” he said. “We don’t want to force people to do it but there’s a lot of people who, I think, would benefit who might not jump out at it but who almost need it.”

### **Community College C.**

Community College C, located outside of Boston, Massachusetts, has an enrollment of approximately 12,000 students and approximately 400 full- and part-time faculty members. Like Colleges A and B, they offer transfer programs as well as technical and career training programs. The college has two campuses, established in 1970 and 1987 respectively; a bus runs between the two campuses regularly throughout the day. Forty-three percent of the students are from minority groups, with a significant a significant number of students from the local population of Hmong immigrants. Forty-six percent of students are first generation college students and 69%

are eligible for financial aid. Like the other Community College A and B, Community College C is not a residential campus.

College C was an early adopter of SoTL, dating back to the early 90s, because a faculty member participated as a faculty fellow in the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) and brought the principles back to the institution. Thus the concept of SoTL has been infused throughout the culture of the institution almost since its inception, and both faculty and staff participate in SoTL activities. “People don’t even know what it stands for, but they’ll be like, ‘Are you going to SoTL?’” she said. “The president and provost use it a lot too.” The college does not have a centralized center for faculty development, but the provost asked Nancy and another faculty member to take over faculty development, “which is still a work in progress,” she said (Nancy, 2019, Personal Interview). Professional development at the college falls under a broad umbrella within the organization, and Nancy said that “with the regular professional development model, not a lot of people were coming to workshops because of the one-shot workshops.” Nancy and her colleague receive course release to administer the SoTL program, but “the problem is that even though [we get] two course reassign times, which is a lot, it’s still not enough to do everything, and still do a good job with teaching.”

“We had the classic understanding [of SoTL],” said Nancy. “We learned about this notion of conducting action research and sharing it....The dissemination piece was the trickiest because a lot of community college faculty are teaching five courses, so they want to try it out but then to actually publish wasn’t easy.” Despite this classic understanding, SoTL has evolved at the college to move away from the action research and instead for faculty to take on broader

projects in a loose configuration of faculty learning communities. “We don’t follow [Cox’s model] exactly,” Nancy said. “But we use elements of it.”

Last year, Nancy and her colleague launched an initiative to study 100% course completion called “Creating a Culture of Persistence and Student Success.” Their goal was to increase the persistence rate from fall to spring by 50%. The initiative is faculty led, but they have included administrators in the project, for example inviting the dean of enrollment to their group to provide them with relevant data. Their provost asked them to put together 18 SoTL related sessions that included staff from all areas of the college, including faculty, financial aid, administrative assistants, institutional research, etc.

The first year, twenty faculty members from sixteen disciplines committed to identify one course in which they would try to retain 100% of the students. They created a blog where everyone logged in what their roster said on the first day and checked in with each other throughout the semester to see how they were doing with retaining students and shared strategies. At the end they calculated the results and did a survey. The first year did not show significant improvement (most people stayed the same or went up a little bit); however, faculty noticed an unintended consequence of the initiative. “What we found out,” said Nancy, “was that it was a collaborative effort. So the discussion around the water cooler was not complaints, but about student persistence and success. The conversation was much more productive.” The cohort of faculty participating in the persistence project met monthly to talk about their experiences. Depending on the time of the semester, attendance ranged from 12 to 24 faculty and a few administrators. Participation was voluntary, though faculty did receive \$350, “which is kind of a drop in the bucket for the work they’re doing, but at least it’s an honorarium,” she said.

The project is now in its second year and the cohort has increased to thirty-three faculty members from sixteen different disciplines, this time including adjunct faculty, and has broadened its scope to collaborate with financial aid, student accounts, and advising enrollment. Nancy attributes the increase in faculty participation in an information session they offered about the 100% completion group at their annual half-day winter retreat. “Everyone who came to the retreat, we pretty much strong armed them,” she said, laughing. “We went around, we had a clipboard, and some of the faculty, had they not been there, they may not have joined.” Despite these “strong arm tactics,” Nancy still considers the motivation for participation to be faculty led because of the participating faculty members’ enthusiasm. “We had so many of the returning faculty and they got up and talked about their experience and one person had won the League for Innovation Award last year, and he listed among his accomplishments at [Community College C] being part of the 100% group,” she said. “I think people are enjoying being part of it.... I think the part-time faculty are looking to be part of the community.”

Nancy believes that voluntary participation is essential for SoTL to be effective. Recently she was asked to lead a mandatory new faculty orientation, and she noticed “a stark difference between when it’s voluntary and when it’s mandatory.” Faculty complained that it was too much work, that it didn’t suit their teaching style, and that it took too much time. Faculty attitudes at the cohort meetings were negative and uncooperative. Although a survey at the end indicated that most participants actually found the experience worthwhile, the difference in morale and enthusiasm was notable. “When it’s voluntary, there is excitement built in and they want to do it,” said Nancy.

A lack of confidence in senior leadership at the college has caused faculty morale to drop in general, but Nancy believes that morale within the SoTL group is higher than average because

faculty spend time talking about what they care about. “People do research on topics relevant to what we do in the classroom and then share out,” she said. “I think they feel they’re being heard.” She noted the particular kind of passion for students and teaching that she observes in her faculty colleagues:

Most of us view community college education through a social justice lens and we feel that this idea of noncompletion means that we’re taking the student’s money. We believe in equity and social justice, so trying to find ways for students to succeed and achieve hopefully either through career or earning a bachelor's...we’ve even had a couple of people in our group who have helped students get all the way to medical school. It’s a very committed group of faculty, so that’s what we care about. We care about student success.

She feels that this passion positions community college faculty to be particularly well-suited to contribute to SoTL scholarship. “For community colleges because we don’t have discipline specific research, this is where SoTL should live,” she said. “I think we should be looking at the community college as a very key, but completely different animal than a four-year institution. Our mission is we don’t have to do this kind of research. We are completely teaching centered.” The needs of community college students are different than those in more elite institutions. “Places that have very few students that actually need extra support, [the faculty there] are trying to work with a very small percentage of their students. They’re trying to up the percentages,” she said. “But the community college, that’s who we have. We have a complete over representation of students of color, first gen[eration], and low income. SoTL is all about that because we need to do research within our classroom and if we can do more broad based, that’s the only way we can find out what’s going on with these students.”“

Unfortunately, because community faculty teach such heavy loads, it is difficult for them to find the time to conduct SoTL research effectively. Nancy and her colleague are working on a proposal so that faculty could apply to get one course reassigned to study persistence and retention efforts in their classroom. “The only way we could do it is [we] could save enough students that it would break even or [we] would save a little money or something,” she said. “But if you're teaching a five load, I mean [teachers] can barely keep [their] head above water.” However, she maintains yet again her position that SoTL should be faculty-led. “I know a lot of colleges have administrators that run SoTL,” she said. “But I think even if [they] could partner with a co-director that was a faculty member...because I think the perception is if it comes from an administrator it feels top down. Everybody has the same goals, but still...[with another faculty member] you know they're understanding that you're going through the same thing.”

### **My Community College.**

Located in Overland Park, Kansas, an affluent suburb of Kansas City, Johnson County Community College serves approximately 19,000 students, with 318 full-time faculty members and 538 adjunct faculty members. They offer 45 programs of study with 99 degree and certificate options, as well as 16 selective admission programs. The majority of students are white (67%), yet despite the affluence of the surrounding community, the institution serves a population of students whose demographics are similar to that of many community colleges in terms of socioeconomic status, first generation, and developmental educational needs. The college is a “commuter campus,” and there are no residence halls or student housing.

The full-time faculty is unionized, and the relationship with administration is wary and sometimes adversarial. Recent contract negotiations came to an impasse and federal mediation was required to resolve the issues regarding compensation. Many full-time faculty members

express the sentiment that administrators have most of the power, but that they don't understand what actually goes on in the classroom. Conversely, administrators often express the belief that while faculty members are experts within their own realm, they lack concrete understanding of the needs of the entire organization. These differing perspectives create an atmosphere of distrust within the organization.

Adjunct faculty members would probably characterize their position outside the sphere of either of these viewpoints. In an effort to encourage full-time faculty to take on responsibilities within the organization that extend beyond teaching, the new Chief Academic Officer has rewritten the adjunct job description to preclude them from participating in any campus-wide committees, contributing to writing curriculum, or performing any of the other tasks traditionally assigned to full-time faculty, resulting in many adjunct faculty members feeling unappreciated and excluded. These changes have fostered conflict and misunderstanding on all sides—administration, full-time faculty, and adjunct faculty.

Traditionally, faculty development fell under the domain of Staff and Organizational Development within the college. However, one year ago the institution created a specific department devoted to Faculty Development with two full-time staff members—a director (this researcher) and a coordinator. Before taking the director position, I served for nearly 20 years as an adjunct faculty member in the English department, and I continue to teach one class per semester in the English for Academics Purposes program and the Honors Program.

As a stipulation of their contract, full-time faculty members are required to participate in Professional Development Days (PDD) at the beginning of each semester. PDD is a five-day in-house conference consisting of various sessions offered on teaching and learning, educational technology, student engagement, and employee engagement. Although it is technically required,

it is poorly attended and little to no oversight takes place to determine the extent to which full-time faculty members actually participate. Adjunct faculty members are typically required to attend one evening department meeting per semester, which they are paid to attend. In addition, they are encouraged but not required to participate in the campus-wide PDD. An unpaid half-day adjunct PDD event is also offered each semester on a Saturday. Additionally, the college offers a voluntary “Adjunct Certification Program,” which is a series of classes offered outside of traditional working hours focused on teaching and learning; upon completion of this program, adjunct faculty are awarded a stipend.

The above-mentioned programs were established at the college before I took my position in faculty development. When I started the job, I began looking for new and innovative ways to engage faculty. I was already familiar with the concept that faculty-led professional development tends to be more successful than mandated professional development, and so my focus is on relationship-building. I regularly meet with faculty to discuss their perceived needs and to encourage them to view my office as a resource to help implement programs or activities that they choose. This has resulted in some success. For example, a faculty member came to me with the idea of holding writing retreats for faculty and staff. I listened to her vision, used my contacts and knowledge of campus procedures to organize this now recurring event, and it is popular and well-attended. Another faculty member was interested in putting together a faculty cohort to participate in diversity training off-campus that they would then bring back to share with their colleagues. I was able to help her recruit participants and help them secure funding for the project. In both of these cases, the faculty member was the “face” of the project, while I strove to stay in the background helping to facilitate. These are small successes, but as I continue to work on building relationships and trust with myself and among faculty, I hope that

these small successes have the potential to accumulate and contribute to a cultural shift in the organization.

In another effort to engage faculty, I began offering a series of JCCC Full-time Faculty-to-Faculty one-off presentations. For example, when I learned that a faculty member in the English Department had spent his sabbatical studying learning transfer and assembling an extensive bibliography, I asked him to offer a session on his research. In another instance, I asked a faculty member from Criminal Justice who had recently completed a doctoral dissertation on how to teach critical thinking skills to share her knowledge. Another session involved three science faculty presenting on how they use active learning strategies in the classroom. Attendance was spotty, ranging from 2 to 15 people depending on the session, which could be a little discouraging for the presenters; however, I did notice one interesting outcome from offering these sessions. Although attendance was less than I'd hoped, awareness was increased. Even if they couldn't attend, faculty were interested to learn about what their colleagues were working on. One presenter remarked to me that even though only two people attended his session, he'd had several people from different departments email him to ask questions about it. I also had different faculty members approach me to say that though they hadn't been able to attend a certain session, that they appreciated the opportunity to hear from their own colleagues. It is likely that if I had invited an outside "expert" to speak on the topics, or if I had presented them myself, faculty would have paid less attention. This is an unquantifiable but encouraging outcome and offers me motivation to continue to attempt to build momentum at a grassroots, faculty-led level, while using my access to administrative resources to implement valuable and relevant faculty development programming.

It is probably worth noting that I have targeted many of these efforts towards full-time faculty—not because adjunct faculty development is less important, but as a strategic tactic to address the inherent hierarchy within the organization. I have noticed that full-time faculty are more responsive to programs or activities that are directed specifically to full-time faculty. I do not believe that this is a result of antipathy or animosity towards adjunct faculty, but rather the suggestion that full-time faculty perceive themselves as having different needs than adjunct faculty. Of course, we also offer faculty development opportunities for adjunct faculty, who tend to be more participatory and engaged with faculty development, perhaps because they are interested in building their resume in the hope of one day being hired full-time, perhaps because they have more time because their teaching load is lighter, or perhaps simply because there are proportionally so many more of them. But as Melinda from Community College A said, “Good teaching transcends content area.” Likewise, I would argue that good teaching also transcends a teacher’s particular employment status, and because adjunct faculty are widely responsible for teaching more and more of our students, the quality of their teaching and their position within the university should be valued—if not monetarily than socially and culturally. Whatever the causes of the uneasy dynamic between full-time and part-time faculty, breaking down the perceived divide between them is another campus cultural shift that I am striving for.

Currently, there is limited knowledge or exposure to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning on the campus. I know of a handful of new full-time faculty members who are familiar with the practice and are conducting research independently within their own classrooms independently; however, there is not a campus-wide awareness of the concept. But there is a widening discussion, especially among newer faculty, of the need for more “evidence-based teaching.” Simultaneously, of course, are a few of the more seasoned faculty who are skeptical

about buying into what appears to them be just another pedagogical fad. As the faculty development office and offerings at JCCC continue to evolve, I plan to use the lessons learned in this study to introduce and integrate the practice of SoTL through Faculty Learning Communities at my college.

### **Focus Group.**

After completing these individual interviews, participants reconvened for a virtual conversation about SoTL, FLCs, and faculty development. Participants noted that each of their respective institutions had slightly different interpretations of SoTL, but that all were firmly committed to the action research component.

“[Community College C) has a more loose definition of SoTL. For us, SoTL has been a vehicle to bring the faculty together around issues that we care about,” said Nancy whose institution has been engaged with SoTL the longest. “SoTL provides a way for faculty from all different disciplines to work together.... We have a very loose structure in that we have monthly meetings, a book club, a launch group, and a 100% course completion group.” Josh at Community College B agreed: “SoTL has infused some enthusiasm among faculty whose morale is a little low because things are a little unsettled in our college right now, and it gives us an opportunity to talk in a positive manner about change as opposed to complaining about things we can’t get done,” he said. “Instead of coming from the top down, faculty have been really involved.” Community College A is the newest to SoTL practices, and Melinda noted that though theirs “is much more structured, there’s still a select group of people participating, and it’s expanding and word is getting out, which is super exciting,” she said. “But I just strive for the multiple opportunities and access points into SoTL.” The SoTL program at Community College A follows the tenets of SoTL the most formally, and Melinda was interested to discover

that others interpreted it more loosely so that “it doesn’t necessarily have to just be a scholarly research study that is going through all the IRB, that there can be other ways to tap into that tangential work that surrounds it, that it’s really rooted in, and so foundational to what I think SoTL really is.”

All agreed that SoTL work has the potential to be contagious about getting faculty excited. “I think it’s because they get to talk about their teaching, and there aren’t a lot of opportunities to do that,” said Josh. “It’s easy to silo, even within a department, it’s easy to be on our own and to not have those conversations.”

But why does it matter that departments and disciplines are siloed? Because “good teaching transcends content area,” said Melinda. “We can learn about good teaching and how we can apply that in our particular subject area across discipline, and so there is value in that. It’s easy to be in our office or in our classroom, our scope getting narrow, and more and more narrow with how we interact and engage with our students and create curriculum. [The connections made in SoTL activities] are a way to have good conversations with people who are excited about this too.” The synergetic effect of campus culture and SoTL activities emerged throughout the discussions; the graphs in Appendix B reveal that this theme recurred more than any other.

Nancy commented on the diversity that exists within the community college. “It’s almost like several institutions in one.” She, for example, teaches developmental English and was working with a colleague who teaches Physics II. Though they had very different populations of students with very different expectations, they realized there was value in sharing strategies that they could both use. In their 100% course completion cohort, the physics teacher suggested that they email every student who didn’t show up on the first day of class. She said, “Okay, that

seems like a very easy strategy, but I had been teaching for 25 years and I had never done that before.” Despite the vast differences between their disciplines and their students, these two faculty members were able to share teaching strategies that benefited them both. Hearing the struggles that each individual department has with their students “sort of demystifies things,” and paints a broader picture of the student experience for faculty to contextualize their students’ situations. The opportunity to hear from other faculty and find out everybody’s concerns and working together becomes working for a common cause. “It breaks down, and sort of eliminates the pettiness that sometimes happens when departments [think] their own department is the more important or whatever,” said Josh.

Building trust is essential for these SoTL activities to be successful. Faculty need to feel confident that if they reveal their struggles and questions, they will not face repercussions or embarrassment. “We always say, ‘What happens in SoTL stays in SoTL,’” said Nancy. Melinda observed that trust-building occurs in the SoTL cohorts. “It becomes a pretty tight group,” she said. “It’s an amazing difference between fall and spring when they’ve traveled together and worked together...I notice that there's a guard up in the fall but there definitely isn't that guard in the spring.”

The benefits of this collegiality can extend to the students as well. Participants agreed that students seeing the collegiality among faculty not just within departments but across departments, witnessing excitement among faculty, creating an environment that can cause students to be more confident and enthusiastic about their situation in the college. It’s also valuable a model for students to observe their own teachers participating in research and continuing their own learning. “Psychologically it’s much better for all of us,” said Josh.

Without exception, lack of time and resources were cited as the greatest barriers for community college faculty's ability to conduct SoTL research. As documented in the graphs found in Appendix B, this theme arose strongly in each institution. The need to keep faculty participation voluntary was also mentioned repeatedly. The challenge for all was finding a balance that could allow faculty members the time and compensation to conduct SoTL research. Unlike their four-year university counterparts, research is not built into the reward system for community college faculty. Yet because of the nature of their jobs and of their students, community college faculty have vast experience and knowledge that if shared, has the potential to benefit teachers at all higher education institutions.

### **Emergent Themes**

After data collection and thorough data immersion, in vivo and axial coding was used to uncover emergent themes. Once coding was complete and clusters and subclusters were identified and memoed. The memos led to the cyclical generation of case summaries, categories, clusters, and themes. As the themes developed and emerged, integrative interpretation of the data (beginning to "tell the story") evolved into the following categories.

#### **Lack of Community College Research and Involvement in SoTL.**

Participants were keenly aware of the role that community colleges play for underserved students. "We have the lowest tuition in Minnesota," said Melinda, faculty member from College A, adding that "making higher education affordable" has been a big focus of their institution for the last 20 years. One of the institution's strategic goals is "academic excellence," and striving to meet that goal was the impetus that led to their engagement with SoTL practices. "We felt we should be modeling [academic excellence], and we should have this reflective lens and be looking at ourselves as practitioners," said Melinda. Sarah, the administrator from

College A added that all too often, that lens is an external one, that most research on community colleges tends to be done by universities, and there is “nothing preventing us from actually looking at what we do within the community college and actually learning from that from a pedagogical perspective.” Melinda noted that the very fact that they are working with community college students makes community college SoTL research all the more relevant:

I mean, I don't know...that sounds arrogant on my part but.... But if we're in the classroom and have heavy teaching loads and we can be making a difference with a population that is not necessarily your high flyers from high school or in higher ed, where these different strategies or design or all those different components, feedback, can make a difference...[then] we need to be doing this research and sharing it and disseminating it among us.

Nancy makes a similar point. She is currently enrolled in a doctoral program for faculty in higher education, and many of her classmates are from some of more prestigious schools in the Boston area. The curriculum has a social justice and equity lens through which the entire program is administered, and she noted that the other people in her cohort have very few students that belong to the marginalized groups that suffer the problems that social justice and equity educational programs seek to address. In fact, those schools are attempting to increase the percentages of those students in their enrollment. “But,” she said, “that's who we have! We have a complete over representation of students of color, first gen, and low income.” She argued that community college faculty need to do the research within their classrooms and if they can do more broad based studies, they can contribute to the scholarship of how to teach these students most effectively.

*The faculty in my institution have a similar compassion for the challenges our students face and feel a similar responsibility for providing successful opportunities for students. They seem to take pride in the fact that they are serving an underserved population. At the same time, I have observed in faculty a desire to be “taken seriously” within the academy. They want their counterparts at 4-year institutions to understand that they are as educated and qualified, and perhaps a certain defensiveness accompanies this attitude. It is possible that this perception affects their expectations of students. In many cases, it causes them to raise their expectations and to encourage their students to perform as strongly academically as any first-year or second-year student at any university. The combination of this and their genuine desire to meet the needs of their students has led to a broadened interest in “evidence-based” teaching, particularly among newer faculty. In my position as faculty development director, I plan to model different elements from the SoTL programs at these institutions to offer the faculty at JCCC. It will be interesting to observe whether the implementation of SoTL practices at my college has an impact on faculty and/or students.*

### **Influence of SoTL on Campus Culture.**

The dominant theme that emerged from all of the conversations was the effect of SoTL activities on collaboration, and the effect of that collaboration on the campus culture. It was clear that the three institutions had elements of similarity that they shared and that seem to be similar to all community colleges. (The graphs found in Appendix B document the frequency with which this topic was mentioned during the interviews.) But there were distinct differences among them too. The greatest commonality among all three was that all three agreed that a collaborative culture made for a better culture. In some cases, this meant collaboration between

faculty and administration, in others, it meant collaboration among faculty and across disciplines, and in others seemed to experience collaboration in both.

Community College A reported a high level of collaboration both among faculty and between faculty and administration. This is probably exemplified by the fact that both a faculty member and administrator chose to take part in the interview to explain their mutual roles in introducing the SoTL program at their institution. Early in our conversation, Melinda noted that “the faculty, administration, the union get along,” she said. “I know in some community colleges where if they are a union state, that can be contentious sometimes, and this isn’t.” Indeed two of the community colleges in the study had faculty unions, Community College A and Community College C, and the relationship between the faculty union and administration at Community College C appeared to be contentious. “We’re in a difficult situation right now because we just had a vote of no confidence with our president,” said Nancy towards the end of our conversation, with a note of almost embarrassment. “But our faculty are very committed and I think the vote was meant ...that this was the only way to make some changes.” This revelation was surprising because prior to this in, she had spoken so positively about the combined efforts of faculty, administration, and staff with their retention initiative. At the same time, she was the most adamant of the three about the importance of SoTL initiatives being faculty led, and the danger of top-down directives. Sarah, the administrator from Community College A shared her perspective, but seemed to have a more pragmatic view. “I think we’ve done fairly well, she said. “We had a new president that came in about seven years ago and he has really worked hard at [the faculty/administration relationship]. I think there was a little bit more friction between faculty and administration with the prior president. [The current president’s] focus is really on

focusing our strengths and developing our strengths and not necessarily succumbing to the bitterness that sometimes the institution [can experience].

Community College B does not have a faculty union, and statewide, community college faculty are not allowed to use the title of “professor.” “It’s not a union state, it’s not a union culture,” Josh said. “We do have a faculty association...but the faculty association doesn’t seem to have a lot of power.” He noted that North Carolina is an at-will state, and that statewide regulations apply to all community colleges. “I don’t know how much you know about North Carolina,” he said. “But we’re all instructors [in the community colleges], we’re not professors.” The ambiguousness of the system seemed to be a source of some unease for the faculty there: “[We’re] on a nine-month contract, and everybody says it’s hard to get fired but...[we] get this letter every year that says ‘Oh, yeah, you’re getting a job next year, congratulations’,” he said laughingly but with an undertone of some resentment.

In fact, the differences among the campus at the three institutions seemed to be directly tied to the faculty relationship with administration. College A reported the highest level of mutual collaboration and, though their introduction of SoTL was recent, seemed to have the highest level of faculty engagement. Rather than having to recruit participants, they consistently had more people interested than were able to participate. College C reported strong relationships among faculty but an adversarial relationship with administration, and while their SoTL program was robust and faculty seemed particularly energized around the retention project, there were suggestions of having to “strong arm” faculty into participating. The faculty at College B, where the faculty/administration divide seemed particularly wide, were repeatedly described as “burned out,” “overburdened,” and resistant to participating in SoTL activities. In fact, not one single faculty member had signed up to participate in the SoTL project that year.

All agreed that collaboration improves culture. Each participant offered many reasons for the benefits of improved collaboration on the campus. Involving faculty with the broader needs of the institution seemed to increase their engagement and even affected the choices they were making in the classroom. “How fantastic is it that instead of complaining about low enrollments and decreased budgets, that faculty are actually doing things that they have control over?” Josh speculated. “It’s much more...psychologically it’s much better for all of us,” agreed Melinda. Achieving a balance between empowerment and autonomy, while still providing direction and resources, would seem to be the most effective way to promote cross-disciplinary, cross-campus collaboration as well as increase faculty morale.

*At my own institution there is little collaboration across disciplines. One place where full-time faculty are able to make some cross-campus connections is New Faculty Orientation, a year-long program in which all new full-time faculty are required to participate. Each year the faculty members who make up these cohorts cite them as almost their only contacts or connections outside their own departments. In a recent conversation with a new faculty member who had completed the orientation, he expressed that what he most appreciated out of the experience was the contacts he made not just with other faculty, but with the staff and administrators from different student services offices around campus. “Even if we don’t speak,” he said, “when I see them around campus I make eye contact and I know what they’re here to do to serve students.” The cohorts formed in New Faculty Orientation often persist for faculty members’ entire careers--participants report feeling a bond with their cohort that never goes away. The practice of SoTL and the creation of Faculty Learning Communities may be another meaningful way to form faculty cohorts at my college.*

### **SoTL’s Positive Impact on Teaching.**

Increased collaboration improves the campus culture and the situation of both faculty and administrators (not to mention staff). While it may be relatively simple to determine the impact of SoTL on faculty through surveys and interviews, understanding the actual effect on students and teaching proves more difficult to measure. Because individual faculty SoTL studies vary widely from teacher to teacher and from discipline to discipline, it is difficult to quantify the overall impact in any single institution. Yet studies show that regardless of the level of rigor of their study, faculty change their pedagogy as a result of SoTL and doing a SoTL project (Burns, 2017 “It opens up a culture of trying new things and being open to trying new things, definitely,” said Josh. Nancy observed that participating in SoTL research “increases reflection and motivation” in teachers. However, SoTL research does not take place in isolation. One of the most integral tenets of SoTL is the requirement to share the results of one’s scholarly teaching and research. When it takes place in an open, collaborative, sharing environment (as opposed to a competitive environment), it almost certainly impacts teaching.

*It is as yet unclear what impact implementing SoTL practices might have at my own institution. Recently, I put out a call for the upcoming semester inviting faculty members to participate in a Faculty Learning Community focused on SoTL. The program included compensation to attend a teaching and learning conference as well as a \$1,000 stipend upon completion of their own SoTL research project. My goal was to form a cohort of four full-time and two part-time faculty. After putting the call out to all 856 faculty members, there were only five responses--four full-time faculty and one adjunct faculty member. The lack of interest was discouraging, but I was gratified that enough applied to form a functional cohort. Only two of the five applicants had heard of SoTL before; the other three signed up because they were interested in trying something new to improve their teaching. This forward thinking, growth*

*mindset among faculty has the potential to spread, and fortunately, the college currently has the financial resources to continue to offer this program in upcoming years. It is to be hoped that the program will take on momentum as more faculty members participate and more knowledge is shared about the benefits of SoTL and positive impact of collaboration across disciplines on the campus culture.*

### **Faculty Led vs Top Down Faculty Development.**

This theme emerges again and again, and arises often enough it warrants its own category. Faculty and administrators alike maintain that the best faculty development is faculty led faculty development. It is the most effective way to engage faculty participation, enthusiasm, and collaboration. Top down initiatives for professional development tend to result in resistance and cynicism. Yet despite this universal agreement, more often than not faculty development initiatives, including coordinated SoTL initiatives, continue to be perceived as top-down mandates rather than organic, faculty led programs designed to meet faculty needs as well as improve performance. To look for ways to foster such collaborative, faculty led development, we now turn to Collaboration Theory to explore the ways in which organizations can foster such a culture.

*Without question, the phenomenon observed in this theme is strongly manifested at my institution. Mandatory faculty development requirements are not well-received. Unfortunately, because faculty members have such heavy teaching loads and busy schedules, they have limited opportunity or motivation to participate in voluntary faculty development activities. Ideally the Faculty Development office would be able to offer opportunities and resources that would inspire an intrinsic motivation for faculty to participate. Certainly, fostering a collaborative culture would likely help promote the popularity and appeal of such opportunities. The*

*implementation of SoTL practices and Faculty Learning Communities may be an opportunity to introduce and foster such a collaborative culture that would also have a positive impact on how faculty teach.*

### **Collaboration**

In addition to an exploration of themes that emerged from the data itself, this study seeks to understand the data within the framework of Collaboration Theory. As noted above, collaboration is a process that occurs over time (Thomson & Perry, 2006). It is a nonlinear process that manifests in “personal relationships, psychological contracts, and informal understandings and commitments” (p. 22). These “integrative” elements need to supersede the more formal organizational roles, and finding balance between these elements may promote long lasting collaboration. The collaboration process can be understood as five non-sequential dimensions: Governance, Administration, Autonomy, Mutuality, and Norms of Trust and Reciprocity. For those wishing to foster collaboration, it is advised to seek balance among all five. Exploration of how the examples of collaboration in each of these cases fits into the five dimensions of collaboration can help illuminate the ways in which collaboration can be fostered in institutions of higher education.

#### **Governance.**

The Governance Dimension requires that partners determine the rules that govern the process jointly; the power must be shared. This can be difficult in a higher education institution where power is often organized hierarchically, where administrators, at least by appearance, have more power within the organization than faculty. In fact for the governance dimension to function effectively all of the participants must be aware that they are all equally responsible for reaching agreement, that if they have shared interests in reaching a shared desired outcome, there

must be an openness in sharing information and mutually respecting opinions. Allowing for consensus to emerge in this scenario requires time, an understanding that total agreement will unlikely be reached on everything, but that respect for all parties will allow for all parties to support a decision once it is made. Working collectively to formulate rules for joint decision making is challenging, and perhaps the burden for collective governance in collaboration falls more heavily on administration in this dimension.

It is clear in the case of all three cases examined in this study, administration is assumed to have a disproportionate degree of authority in the organization. As discussed above, Community College A seemed to have the least hierarchical relationship between administration and faculty and the highest level of faculty engagement in the SoTL opportunities offered. The program administered at College A had been jointly created by an administrator and a faculty member, yet the administrator voluntarily stayed out of the way and let the faculty member administer the program with faculty, forgoing getting any sort of credit or recognition for the program. Community College C clearly had tension between faculty and administration, yet the faculty was able to exert its power enough to create a kind of us-against-them situation where the faculty came together in spite of the administration. In Community College B, where faculty perceived themselves to have the least power, participation in the SoTL opportunities offered was least appreciated. For collaboration to be successful, governance, or who's in charge of making the rules, should be determined jointly.

### **Administration.**

Another key element in the dimensions of collaboration that seems to be difficult for community colleges to find balance in the collaboration process is the Administration dimension. This is the nuts and bolts of implementation. Collaborations must have some kind of

organization in order to accomplish a purpose. This is where the traditional top-down hierarchical structure can get in the way collaboration. The people at the top make the rules, and then they instruct someone to enforce them. These administrative roles are important, perhaps even essential for accomplishing certain aspects of operating a college. But for collaboration to thrive, these hierarchical relationships must become more horizontal. Faculty are decentralized by nature--each to his or her own discipline, his or her own classroom--they are focused on their own subjects and often lack the time and resources to develop a complete picture of the organization.

For the administrator to foster collaboration, it is essential to honor and understand this decentralization and to respect the perspectives that brings, as Sarah from Community College A demonstrates when she says, “I think it is the partnership between administration and faculty...I try to give Melinda the stage because I think it’s received much better when it comes from full-time faculty.” At the same time, it is important for faculty to recognize their sometimes more limited perspective and allow an interdependency to develop. According to Thomson and Perry (2006), the different partners involved in a collaboration include “convener, advocate, technical assistance provide, facilitator funder, each of which is necessary for the collaboration as a whole to achieve its goals” (p. 26) Vulnerability is required on both sides to allow the necessary roles to evolve.

### **Autonomy.**

The Autonomy dimension might help explain the disconnect that can occur in the community college setting when different collaboration partners’ self-interest is overlooked in the Governance or the Administration dimension. Naturally in any relationship, in any organization, there is a distinction between self-interest and collective interest. The individual

feels a need to defend his or her individuality and well-being. At the same time, being part of an organization or relationship suggests either a desire or at least an understanding to contribute to the collective interest. This conflict can be destructive and frustrating, but it can also bring a dynamic tension that can enliven the collaborative process and help to explain the unexpected, synergistic outcomes that can occur in the “black box” of collaboration. When the organization’s collaboration goals conflict with the individuals’ goals, the individual’s sense of identity can be lost, which can stall or stymie the collaboration process.

The faculty at Community College C illustrate this tension in their project for student retention. Their endeavor was faculty-driven, and at first they did not perceive the need for administrative involvement until they got more involved with the project.

“We designed what we wanted to try, but then we had have our enrollment team come in and explain...we didn’t even know the difference among all the terms. ‘What’s the difference between persistence and retention?’ We did research on that and then [the Dean of Enrollment] came and explained and brought in all kinds of data. So then we had [Institutional Research] run a bunch of numbers trying to figure out what population is not persisting.”

The project began with the faculty group working toward their goals individually, without seeking support or involvement from administrative entities within the institution. As they became more involved with the project, they began to understand how other groups previously perceived as separate and not relevant to their purposes could in fact assist them in their endeavor. The original tension experienced was overcome by the discovery of a collective interest. Working to find commonalities in differences can bring transformational results, and perhaps help bring balance to the dimensions of collaboration.

**Mutuality.**

In considering the balance of the five dimensions in the cases discussed here, it would seem that the Mutuality Dimension weighs the heaviest. This is the area where faculty, no matter how they came to participate in a collaborative process, whether top-down mandate or faculty led, perceive the most benefit.

As Nancy pointed out in her discussion of the faculty orientation program that new faculty were required to attend, and which she noted was actively resisted by faculty, the ending survey indicated that “everybody thought it was worthwhile.” Although they resisted experience because the situation probably because of a perceived lack of autonomy, in the end the experience was perceived as beneficial. In order for collaboration to succeed collaborating partners must find some sort of benefit in the sharing of information. It is essential for the relationships in a collaborative partnership to be interdependent despite having differing interests. Somehow, administrators must learn how to allow autonomy; at the same time, when faculty are willing to give up something in their own interest in order to benefit the commonality or “complementarity” (p. 27), both sides can benefit. If both parties share the common goal of serving students, then finding ways to reach that common goal and is mutually beneficial to all parties--teachers, administrators, and most importantly, students.

**Norms of Reciprocity and Trust.**

Building these mutually beneficial collaborations requires reciprocity and trust. Like the other dimensions, building this type of social capital requires time. At its most basic, reciprocity is a kind of “I will if you will” mentality--the need for both partners to believe that both sides are giving and sharing information. Trust takes it a step farther, and assumes that all partners are

acting in good faith, honestly, and with integrity. Building these social capital norms cannot be forced but require the time and emotional investment needed to build personal relationships.

As observed in Community Colleges B and C, faculty had developed an “us-against-them” mentality with the administration. In College C, it seemed to foster more collegiality and trust among faculty, if not across the institution. This reciprocity and trust may be what motivated them to pursue the 100% completion project in spite of a lack of trust in administration because they had banded together in pursuit of a goal. There seemed to be less trust among faculty, as well as between faculty and administration, at College B; perhaps their the insecurity they felt about their jobs contributed to this and prevented them from feeling empowered initiate change. Because they are not guaranteed a returning contract each year, faculty there may feel a sense of uncertainty and a need to protect their own self-interest (the need to keep their job). In addition to inhibiting the development of the norms of reciprocity and trust, the need for self-protection interferes and causes imbalance with the mutuality and autonomy dimensions because individuals are less inclined to work toward the good of the organization, but rather to protect their own interests.

## **Conclusion**

The inductive themes that emerged from the data can be understood within the dimensions of Collaboration Theory, and understanding how these themes fit into the framework can help the actants seeking to foster collaboration strive for balance among the five dimensions. Understanding the elements that affect collaboration can help community college faculty and administrators create an environment that promotes improved collegiality and potentially opportunities for improved teaching effectiveness.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Research Question

This study sought to answer the question: In what ways can the implementation of SoTL practices through Faculty Learning Communities in the community college promote improved pedagogical practices and foster collaboration? The faculty members and administrator who participated in this study were asked to reflect upon their experience facilitating faculty engagement with SoTL, their experience with their versions of Faculty Learning Communities, and the effect those activities had on pedagogy and collaboration. Alongside the three illustrative cases, I position my own case study of implementing SoTL practices at the community college where I am the faculty development director.

### Conclusions

The study participants were united in their belief that collaboration benefits both faculty and the institution. Cross-disciplinary, cross-departmental connections give faculty members a broader picture of their institution and allow them to make decisions within a class that can benefit their students beyond that class. Faculty members who engage in SoTL change their teaching practices in some way, but it is difficult to measure the impact on students. Faculty members who participate in some sort of learning community experience enhanced collaboration. This enhanced collaboration improves faculty morale and affects the college culture, but more research is needed to measure the impact of that on students. Community college faculty lack the time and resources to do SoTL, but if research can show that the practice of SoTL and participating in FLCs increases student retention and enrollment, institutions could justify compensating community college faculty for their efforts. Because the sole job of community faculty is to teach, and because their student population represents such a diverse cross-section of socio-economic, ethnic, and racial groups, and students with different

learning abilities, they are well-positioned within the academy to conduct this research, but they need the time and resources to do it. Instead of university scholars studying the role of community colleges and their students, space needs to be made for community colleges to study themselves rather than being treated like the workhorses of academia.

Lack of time and resources is not the only impediment to community college faculty conducting SoTL and participating in FLCs. The institutions themselves get in the way. The hierarchical nature of academia impedes collaboration and growth. The lack of trust between faculty and administration creates a tension that obstructs either side's ability to accomplish their goals. Ironically, both sides usually have the same goal—to offer the best services, opportunities, and education possible students. Yet the two groups often seem to be at odds. As Sarah, the administrator from Community College A said about the benefits that arise from the cross-disciplinary connections that result from SoTL work, “Don't tell anyone, but [the opportunity for collaboration] is really what we're talking about here.” She was acknowledging that, while the SoTL research itself was important, fostering a more collaborative campus culture was even more important. If institutions of higher education can find a way to organize themselves in such a way that allows a more heterarchical structure, one that allows partners to share certain positions of power and authority equally, improved collaboration will result. Faculty will feel empowered to make decisions and choices that benefit the wider organization, and administrators will have the trust to let them do so. Both partners must take responsibility for their own roles while understanding those roles within the organization, and in order for this to happen, both partners must trust each other.

This study uses Collaborative Theory as its theoretical framework. Viewed through the lens of Thomson & Perry's (2006) five dimensions of collaboration, the analysis of these interviews highlighted an imbalance of these dimensions, but for collaboration to be effective, the collaborating

partners must “negotiate an equilibrium among the five dimensions that will allow them to achieve small gains in the short term, which will, over time, allow them to develop the trust and negotiated agreements necessary to realize longer-term benefits” (p. 29). Analysis of the deductive coding of these interviews revealed that the collaborations that took place were strongest in Mutuality as well as in building Social Capital Norms of Reciprocity and Trust. As those dimensions expanded, the Autonomy dimension also expanded, as partners began to have a better understanding of the conflicts and confluences of their individual role within the organization as well as their collective place in it. The Governance and Administration dimensions were the most out of balance. One of the strongest emergent themes uncovered in the inductive coding, repeated multiple times by all subjects, was that “The best faculty development is faculty-led development.” Yet most faculty appear to feel that they lack the autonomy or freedom to take this sort of governance role on; rather, they perceive that they are subject to top-down directives from administration to participate in activities that they do not find meaningful. Viewed through the lens of Collaboration Theory, this emergent theme of top-down vs faculty-led can be understood in the Governance dimension. Thomson & Perry (2006) indicate that determining the rules that will govern the behavior and actions of collaborating partners must be through “shared power arrangements” (p. 24). If joint decision making is not allowed, the collaboration will not succeed. If administrators want faculty to participate and invest psychologically in faculty development activities, they cannot be perceived as imposed upon them, but rather, jointly arrived upon. But this shared power must go both ways. Faculty must also be willing to take ownership of their own faculty development, and SoTL is ideal for accomplishing this. SoTL is highly individual, it is faculty members studying their own teaching; yet it is also highly collaborative, as practitioners are expected to share their results and this sharing typically begins with their participation in FLCs. The hierarchical nature of most academic institutions creates the perception

that administrators hold the power, which can leave faculty members feeling powerless when they are obligated to participate in activities that they don't find meaningful. However if administrators are able to find a way spread out that perception of power, to perhaps to give up some level of control, and allow the faculty members to take a share of responsibility in governance, better collaboration will ensue. This collaboration will result in a broader understanding of each other's roles within the institution and a better understanding of the institution itself. Participants in this study indicated that this broader understanding improves morale at the institution. While this study does not attempt to address the impact on students of the improved morale caused by increased collaboration, all participants stated an intuitive perception that students do in fact benefit when their teachers have this broader perspective.

Analysis of the data indicated that the Administrative Dimension of collaboration was also out of balance, to different degrees, at the participants' institutions. If participation in collaboration (such as in SoTL FLCs) is ideally voluntary and partners are autonomous, if governance truly takes place jointly, then who will make it happen? "Collaborations are not self-administering enterprises" (Thomson & Perry, p. 25, 2006), yet if the governance structures are decentralized, it would seem to follow that so too must be the administrative structures. Practically speaking, though, some systematic administration and coordination must take place if there is to be any systematic method to the collaboration and its outcomes. As discussed above, faculty themselves do not have the time to coordinate, communicate, organize, disseminate information and keep partners apprised of the (ideally) jointly determined governance procedures. Yet, as also emphasized above, faculty prefer not to have a top-down structure with an administrator running the show. In the case of the participants in this study, each faculty member interviewed was granted release time from their teaching in order to administer the program. This is a solution, but they each indicated that the release time was not

sufficient to do either of their jobs as well as they would like--they lacked enough time to administer the SoTL programming as effectively as they'd like, and they also felt like they did not have the time to put into their classes that they needed. Yet, according to the participants, if a person, even a faculty member is given the job to do full-time, they are perceived as "administration," and encounter the obstacles that arise from imbalance in the Governance dimension. In short, in order to foster the most effective collaboration on a community college campus, solutions must be found to correct the imbalance in the Governance and Administrative dimensions.

### **Implications**

The results of this study suggest that fostering effective collaboration across disciplines, across departments, and across the institution has many positive outcomes. It increases morale among faculty, it can improve relationships between faculty and administration, and it has the potential of benefitting the student experience at that institution. Yet the phenomenon of "siloeing" is demonstrated to exist in all of these institutions of higher education. Even though most constituents and stakeholders are working toward the shared goal of serving students and improving education, they often work in isolation, not fully aware of the efforts of their colleagues in other areas of the institution. Implementing a SoTL program through Faculty Learning Communities can be a powerful way to cultivate collaborative culture on a community college campus. It meets the individual needs of faculty members to study and improve their own teaching, it creates opportunities for them to form collaborations in new and unexpected places, it broadens their understanding of their own institution, and it has the potential to position them as an important source of pedagogical knowledge within the academy. Unfortunately, most community college faculty lack the time and resources to conduct SoTL research. It is worth considering that it may be in the best interest of institutions to create and offer the time, resources, and support for faculty to conduct this important research and participate in these

collaborative opportunities. Many of the problems and challenges that community colleges face today, such as poor student retention and completion, could be addressed and improved through faculty-led SoTL projects. These would not be quick fixes, but they very likely would lead to more long-term successful outcomes for staff and students alike.

Those seeking to improve opportunities for such collaboration should do so by focusing on managing the five dimensions of collaboration. As noted above, the process of collaborative governing seems to be the most troublesome in the community college. Collaborating partners need to be empowered to make decisions jointly to determine guidelines and desired outcomes. The relationship should not be hierarchical, and both sides need to build trust. Faculty should be allowed the time and support to bring forth ideas and initiatives that promote their own development as well as better the institution. At the same time, faculty can be open to the ideas and initiatives brought forth by administration; in order for this to happen, administrators need to take the time to build the relationships that foster the social capital norms of reciprocity and trust, rather than forcing top-down mandates. These relationships can be formed and fostered through the implementation of SoTL practices and FLCs.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

This study investigated ways in which the implementation of SoTL practices through Faculty Learning Communities in the community college can promote improved pedagogical practices and foster collaboration. Additional research is needed to understand how to improve the governance and administration of collaboration efforts. In addition, while we know that SoTL causes instructors to be more reflective and to make changes in their teaching, more research is needed to further explore the specific ways that SoTL and FLCs impacts students. Finally, it would be important to consider the role that community college faculty can play in



contributing to SoTL research more broadly across the academy.

## **Conclusion**

Conducting this study broadened my perspective of SoTL and its role in the community college. As our students change and evolve, so must our faculty. Thanks to modern innovations in communication technology and the amount of information that is available to all of us today, the teacher's role has shifted from imparting information to teaching students how to navigate the information they have at their fingertips. Never has effective teaching been more important. As different societal factions call into question the necessity for and value of higher education, college teachers must put aside insular thinking and consider their role within the wider context of society. SoTL can be an effective way to lead this call. Being able to provide "evidence" for the inherent value that most college faculty members know exists within an education will silence naysayers and demonstrate the importance of accessible education. Fostering collaborative cultures within the institution will further broaden this perspective of SoTL. In my role as faculty development director at JCCC, I hope to play some part in this movement towards broadening the role of SoTL within the academy and furthering the place of the community college within that context.

Integrating SoTL practices into the community college setting has the potential to bring about many benefits. It will influence, change, and likely improve faculty members' pedagogical practices. It would allow instructors at community colleges to share the expertise they have developed in teaching widely diverse students with widely diverse needs and sharing this expertise could benefit four-year instructors as well. Perhaps most importantly, integrating SoTL practices into the community college setting introduces an opportunity for cross-disciplinary, cross-campus collaborations that benefits the institution as a whole. Improving teaching while

enhancing collaboration has the potential to improve the experience and performance not just of faculty members, but of every single member of the institution, from faculty to staff to student.

And the more institutions that experience this enhanced collaborative culture, the more the broader institute of academia will succeed as well.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Describe your institution. What is it like academically, physically, demographically, politically, culturally etc.?
2. Describe your role in your position. What are your responsibilities regarding faculty development?
3. Describe the level of collaboration among faculty on your campus.
4. Describe the level of collaboration between faculty and staff on your campus.
5. How would you describe your level of familiarity with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, or SoTL?
6. Can you describe how you first became aware of the concept of SoTL of FLCs? What was your initial reaction to the concepts.
7. In your own words, what is SoTL?
8. What level of familiarity do you believe your faculty has with SoTL?
9. How do you incorporate SoTL principles into faculty development?
10. Describe your experience with Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs).
11. How do you think participating in FLCs affects faculty morale?
12. How do you think participating in FLCs influences what faculty do in the classroom?
13. How effectively do FLCs foster collaboration?
14. What are the effects of collaboration on teaching effectiveness?
15. In what ways do you encourage faculty improve their skills and methods in the classroom?
16. In what ways does collaboration among faculty affect the culture of the college?
17. In what ways does collaboration affect the way faculty members teach?
18. If you were to develop a 15-minute video introducing SoTL or FLCs for faculty, what might that look like? What would you want to be sure was included?
19. Describe successes you feel have come from offering FLCs.
20. Describe failures you feel have come from offering FLCs.
21. Can you draw any connections or conclusions to any success, challenges, changes as a result of faculty participation in FLCs?

## Appendix B: Qualitative Coding Graphs



