

# Assessment *in* Practice

## **The Student Transformative Learning Record at the University of Central Oklahoma: A Commitment to Improving Student Learning**

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In recent years, the scrutiny of higher education has been significant. Many have questioned the value of a college degree in light of the increasing amount of debt that students are incurring and the reality that many are not able to find jobs upon the completion of their degrees (Selingo, 2013). Additionally, there is the very basic question of whether students are experiencing learning gains upon their matriculation through college (Arum & Roksa, 2011). The University of Central Oklahoma (UCO), like the rest of higher education in this country, has faced criticism from the general public and certainly public officials who are expressing these concerns. (Ehrenberg, 2002).

UCO orchestrated a plan to overcome these challenges in 2007 by developing a structure for capturing the learning outcomes of students as they matriculated through the institution (Cunliff & Hughes, 2011). The concept used to define this learning experience was called “Transformative Learning” (TL), which is derived from Mezirow’s (2000) notion of transformative educational development of adult learning. The model focuses on the learning centered education model that was to be created for curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities (Barthell et al., 2010). The notion of TL was also a result of the work from Learning Reconsidered (2006), which proposed that learning must be reconsidered and that a new focus should include developing research on an emerging generation of students. This research would include the development of the whole student with a focus on academic learning and student development in a transformative context. All campus resources would be used in the transformative education of the whole student and provide a practical framework for making the entire campus a learning community. The ultimate goal was to focus on developing and assessing student learning outcomes at every level of the institution.

At UCO, student transformative learning experiences are exemplified in a set of six developing practices, all of which promote student success through high levels of student engagement. These

six practices became known as UCO's Central Six tenets of Transformative Learning: 1) Discipline Knowledge; 2) Leadership; 3) Research, Scholarly, and Creative Activities; 4) Service Learning and Civic Engagement; 5) Global and Cultural Competencies; and 6) Health and Wellness.

### **TITLE III GRANT**

In September of 2014, UCO was awarded a Title III grant in the sum of 7.7 million dollars for a 5 year implementation period. This grant focuses on the documentation of beyond-disciplinary knowledge and skills as well as discipline knowledge. Students develop these skills through experiences in each of the "Central Six" tenets of transformative learning.

Specifically, the Title III grant endeavors to strengthen UCO's ability to help students be successful in their educational pursuits and in their post-graduation efforts in employment and graduate education. The grant funding began October 1, 2014 and will run for 5 consecutive years. As matching funds allow, the grant also will support additional transformative learning experiences for years to follow through the implementation of Student Transformative Learning projects that are both campus and community based.

### **STUDENT TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING RECORD**

It is one thing for a university to declare that it provides high impact practices and transformative learning experiences and quite another to demonstrate it. This type of learning occurs in many facets of student engagement across the institution in curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. How do you capture these experiences? Since these activities are so varied, how do you assess and document them in a meaningful way? Most importantly, how do you make the concept of "transformative learning" tangible for students in order for them to articulate the value of their learning?

The University of Central Oklahoma utilizes the Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR). STLR is a unique tool and process designed to capture, assess and document student transformative learning. Students are then able to collect, reflect and present their strengths in important employability, communication, and citizenship skills.

While full-time staff members in the STLR office are responsible for the effective implementation of the grant and associated tasks, there is a cross-institutional team of professional staff and faculty members who have been and continue to be invested in the STLR process. These individuals enthusiastically collaborate to achieve the end-goal of a product that will serve the needs of our students and also the needs of our state.

### **HOW STLR WORKS**

Faculty and professional staff trained in STLR assessment intentionally create learning activities and environments (curricular, co-curricular, or extra curricular) designed to expand students' perspectives about themselves and others so that

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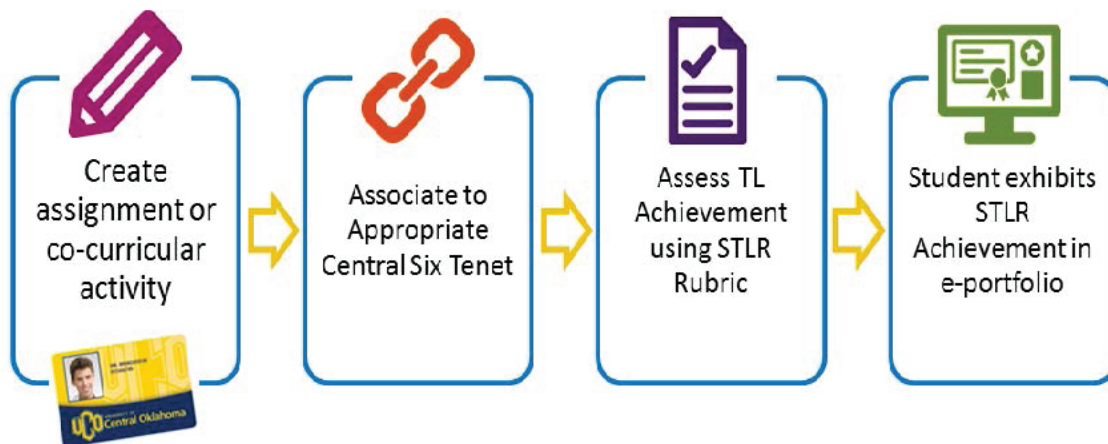
they understand the benefit of developing important life skills while they are in college and afterwards as life-long learners.

The learning activity is associated to one or more of the Central Six tenets of Transformative Learning. Students participate in the STLR-tagged assignments, events, or projects. Then, STLR-trained faculty and staff assess a student's progression in the related tenet(s) using a common STLR rubric that is automatically linked to the transformative learning competencies. The student's engagement may be assessed as Exposure, Integration or Transformation.

Students are able to view individual transformative learning assessments and traditional learning activities in a single D2L student dashboard that includes a STLR progress widget. Students can then collect examples of strengths and work in a repository across all classes and years at UCO in the D2L ePortfolio Tool. Students may choose to add multi-media images of artwork research posters, sound bytes, music samples, videos, writing samples, reflections--evidence of their skills. Students curate their most exemplary work and display in ePortfolio web-page presentations to be shared by link to scholarship committees, graduate schools, or potential employers.

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## How STLR Works



### THE VALUE OF STLR FOR STUDENTS

The value of STLR for students is multifold and enduring. Students who utilize their Student Transformative Learning Record to capture their participation and learning across the spectrum of their educational experiences will be encouraged to develop an ePortfolio of their work. This ePortfolio will allow students to organize and provide evidence of their learning through the inclusion of artifacts that are assessed by faculty or professional staff members who have been trained and coached in the assessment techniques. The inclusion of assessed artifacts in a STLR ePortfolio gives a higher level of value and validity to a student's STLR artifact. For example, a student who discusses an assignment in a reflection paragraph in their ePortfolio will now be able to upload the artifact as an example and also the assessment comments and associated rubric from the faculty or staff member.

Another significant value of STLR for students is the inclusion of both curricular and co-curricular experiences in one place. Academic transcripts show a listing of courses and associated grades. While it is valuable to see the content to which a student was exposed during their educational tenure, the value of the STLR rubric is that it transcends the classroom and captures all kinds of learning experiences in the life of a student – everything ranging from their learning that takes place in their student employee position to their student leadership or service opportunities.

One final value of STLR to the students is the preparation that it will give them to write an effective cover letter or a resume that is reflective of the breadth of their experiences. We also project that students with comprehensive experiences in the Central Six tenets of Transformative Learning will be better equipped for both success in the interview process and success in employment pursuits beyond UCO.

### **THE VALUE OF STLR FOR FACULTY- A REFLECTION**

As a civic engagement and service-learning practitioner at the University of Central Oklahoma, the STLR model of exposure, integration and transformation helps me inform, educate and engage students in my courses. For example, in the fall of 2014, I utilized STLR in my U.S. Women's History course. The course offered a broad sweep of the history of women in the United States through readings, research and teamwork. The students learned on the first day of the course that they would engage in a semester-long service-learning project working in teams. Dr. Sharra Hynes, Executive Director of Experiential Learning, discussed the value of service learning and UCO's Volunteer and Service Learning Center (VSLC). Hynes and her office had selected six community partners in advance and thought they would pair well with the class reading, Jimmy Carter's *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power* (Jimmy Carter, 2014), part of a campus social justice book series. Each team identified a team leader, delegated tasks and researched the mission and purpose of the community organization. Each student registered online with the VSLC to document 15 hours of direct service with the community organization.

#### *Reflection and the STLR Rubric: Exposure, Integration and Transformation*

We find real value in service-learning activities. In the reflection component of the course, we can assess student learning as exposure, integration or transformation. In other words, were you exposed to a new idea (exposure), did you begin to incorporate the concept into your life (integration), or is there evidence that you were truly transformed by the service-learning project (transformation)? All students prepared a service-learning essay reflecting on the value of the project and making connections to at least two of Carter's twenty-three actions that we can take as engaged citizens.

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Here is an example of transformation from a member of the Beautiful Dream Society team: “This project has meant a lot to me...It changed my perspective regarding the seriousness of human trafficking. Before starting the project, I was not aware that human trafficking has been directly affecting our community. It relates to our class because Beautiful Dream Society takes women who have been abused and beaten down, and empowers them, helping them along the steps to living a normal and healthy life. Coming into this semester, I was still unsure of what I really wanted to do when I left college. Most people are concerned with getting a job with a decent wage and trying to achieve the ‘American Dream.’ Money has never been my main objective. I’ve always wanted to help people. It was only after being introduced to Beautiful Dream Society and their mission that I learned my heart is in nonprofit work, and I want to continue to volunteer with Beautiful Dream Society.”

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## WHERE ARE WE NOW?

After successful Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 pilots, the STLR program has been expanded. The integrative approach to STLR is enhanced by the fact that faculty and professional staff are trained together. The STLR assessment training involves use of learning management system competency structures and is collaboratively taught by members of the STLR Office and the Technology Resource Center. The student dashboard with STLR achievements has been made available through the D2L Brightspace Learning Environment to all students. Student orientations and other campaigns throughout the semester expose students to the concept of transformative learning and the value of STLR.

## Student View of STLR Widget in D2L Dashboard

The screenshot displays the 'STLR - Overall Progress' widget in a D2L dashboard. The widget is titled 'STLR - Overall Progress' and includes a lock icon. Below the title, there is a section for 'Overall Progress' with a dropdown arrow. The progress is shown in five colored boxes:

- Global and Cultural Competencies:** Achieved 4
- Health and Wellness:** Achieved 0
- Leadership:** Achieved 0
- Research, Creative and Scholarly Activities:** Achieved 1
- Service Learning and Civic Engagement:** Achieved 0

Below these boxes is the 'STLR' logo. To the right of the progress widget is an 'Activity Feed' widget showing submission notifications:

- Sep 17 Dropbox Submission (3:10 PM): You submitted to the Dropbox: "Global Event Presentation - STLR".
- Sep 14 Dropbox Submission (3:27 PM): You submitted to the Dropbox: "HW - Dropbox".

At the bottom left, there is an 'Upcoming Dates' widget with a 'WEEKLY OVERVIEW' section:

- Sep 20 - 26: 0
- Sep 27 - Oct 03: 1

UCO will continue to evaluate the learning outcomes and other analytics data for opportunities to enhance the program.

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## About NILOA

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- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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