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RESEARCH ARTICLE

From anxiety to empowerment: A Learning Community of University Teachers

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Increasing numbers of ‘teaching-only’ staff are being appointed in Higher Education in the UK. At one research-intensive university a new category of academic staff was recently introduced: University Teachers, who are required to engage in scholarly activity as part of their conditions of employment. For many this scholarly activity equates to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). In an attempt to support this growing body of staff in their engagement with SoTL, a year-long Learning Community (LC) was formed. This paper outlines the activities of the LC and presents the outcomes of a collaborative project to explore its members’ experiences. We describe the developmental process of LC membership and consider the parallels between our findings and theories of social capital and transformative learning. We conclude with a consideration of how LCs might be used as an engaging form of academic staff development.

Keywords: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; Learning Community; social capital; transformative learning

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Introduction

Increasing numbers of ‘teaching-only’ staff are being appointed in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2008) the proportion of staff with an ‘academic employment function’ on teaching-only contracts rose from 20.0% in 2003/04 to 25.4% in 2006/07.

Concurrently, international debate is ongoing regarding the relationship between research and teaching in Higher Education (HE). A commentary on responses to the HE white paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, stated that the ‘Government is not seeking an artificial divide between teaching and research’ and that academics need to ‘keep up to date with their field through engagement in some form of advanced scholarly activity but this need not necessarily be through participation in government-funded, leading-edge research’ (DIUS 2003, 7).

This focus on scholarly activity has come about, at least in part, in response to a report from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Scholarship Revisited* (Boyer 1990). This report introduced the concept of the scholarship of teaching or, as it will be referred to herewith, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). The aim of Boyer’s report was to encourage a re-evaluation of the status of teaching (and other activities) relative to research in the Academy and since its publication there has been much debate around the issue of SoTL.

In 2001/02, the University of Glasgow (UoG) introduced a new category of academic staff, the University Teacher (UT). UTs have the same pay and conditions as lecturers; however they are required to engage in scholarship rather than research

(Matthew 2009). Scholarship, for the purposes of the UT contract at UoG, is defined as: ‘maintaining and developing knowledge within an individual's specialism, and academic professional discipline, as necessary to fulfill an effective research-informed teaching role’ (University of Glasgow 2009). While all UTs remain aligned to the departments they teach in and the subjects they teach not all UTs can maintain and develop knowledge in their specialism i.e. their subject area, through traditional research routes. In many disciplines research requires substantial infrastructure and grant-funded resources that are not normally available to UTs. UTs’ ‘academic professional discipline’ can be considered as teaching and the scholarship that surrounds and supports it, and therefore for some UTs maintaining and developing knowledge can be achieved by undertaking scholarly explorations of their teaching practice: that is, engaging in SoTL. At the time this project started (2005-06), SoTL was a relatively new concept to many UTs.

To support UTs’ engagement with SoTL a Learning Community (LC) was set up. The LC was entirely funded through a UoG Learning and Teaching Development Fund grant which, at that time, supported projects that aligned with the institution’s Strategic Plan. The project aligned with several objectives in the Strategic Plan including “to develop the abilities and expertise of staff to enable the achievement of agreed job and performance objectives.” The LC was based on the model of Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) which have existed for some time within HE, particularly in the United States. The evidence from more than 25 years of the FLC ‘movement’ suggests that FLC members are tenured earlier (Cox 2004) and believe that their membership has a positive impact on their students’ learning (Cox 2007). FLCs are typically made up of about 12 individuals who, for approximately a year,

engage in an in-depth consideration of an aspect of learning and teaching or professional development (Cox 2007). The authors believe the Glasgow LC was the first of its kind in the UK.

This paper starts with a description of the LC and its activities. The outcomes of a collaborative project to investigate members' experience of being part of the LC are then presented and the implications of these outcomes are discussed with particular reference to theories of social capital and transformative learning. The paper concludes with a consideration of the requirements necessary to ensure an effective LC and the potential of LCs to support and enable academics to enhance their practice.

Description of the Learning Community

In December 2005 all UTs employed at the UoG (143 at that time) were invited by email to apply to join the LC. Applicants were asked to make a supporting statement indicating their reasons for applying. Twenty two UTs applied (15.5%) and since the upper recommended limit for FLCs is 15 (Cox 2007), the decision was made to accept 14 UTs (9.9% of total UTs at UoG) based only on their availability for monthly meeting and retreats. By the time of the first regular meeting, two members had decided to leave the LC for professional or personal reasons; the remaining 12 members were active throughout the entire LC and the collaborative project reported here. The LC comprised nine women and three men and six of the institution's nine faculties were represented. The LC was supported throughout its existence by its facilitator (JMCK).

Cox (1999, 2007) argues that retreats are an essential component of a FLC. The Glasgow LC started with a retreat in February 2006, which involved two days of activities, both social and academic, in self-catered accommodation. Activities included a consideration of the relationship between excellence in teaching and SoTL (Kreber 2002a) and how SoTL is assessed or evidenced. Members were also encouraged to identify individual Teaching Development Projects (TDPs). An outcome of the retreat was the decision to draft a jointly authored 'work-in-progress' paper (Bell et al. 2006). A final retreat to discuss evaluation activities and organise the remainder of the collaborative project took place in April 2007.

The FLC model suggests that regular activities should be scheduled; these include informal meetings, seminars and workshops optimally every two weeks. The facilitator of the Glasgow LC decided this level of commitment from its members was over-ambitious given that individuals were participating in addition to their normal workload. Therefore, monthly evening meetings were scheduled throughout 2006. A typical meeting involved informal discussion while members gathered to share refreshments followed by a seminar on a topic identified by the community, for example: gaining ethical approval for SoTL projects, obtaining student feedback, enquiry-based learning. Each seminar was led by one or more members of the community and/or the facilitator. Attendance varied throughout the year; however, all members attended a majority of meetings. A central activity of the LC was each member's TDP. Mini-groups of three or four individuals were formed to offer each member feedback and advice, to allow refinement and development of their TDP. The final activity of the LC was to undertake an investigation of the LC itself using a

negotiated and collaborative approach and the methodology adopted is discussed below.

Methodology

Qualitative research design rationale – a negotiated approach

All of the authors (with the exception of JMcK, the facilitator) were members of the LC, all attended the initial retreat and attended a majority of regular meetings throughout 2006 and all were present at the meetings devoted to designing the research reported here. Each author performed one or more data gathering/analysis/authoring task. These included analysis of interview data, reflective statements and application statements; gathering and analysing members' SoTL 'outputs'; drafting and editing parts of the paper; and commenting on/critiquing the manuscript prior to publication. Thus each author made a substantial contribution to this collaborative paper.

To our knowledge there has not been a detailed investigation of FLC membership experience; it was therefore decided to adopt an exploratory, qualitative approach to uncover members' experiences. A number of questions were identified to allow an exploration of members' experiences of being part of the LC, its impact on their practice, on their awareness of SoTL as a process and on themselves as practitioners. This paper focuses on two of these questions:

- In what ways (if any) has our attitude and approach to teaching and SoTL changed?
- In what ways (if any) has our engagement with and confidence in teaching and SoTL changed?

Data collection methods

Members were asked to write reflections of their understanding of SoTL at the beginning and end of the LC, and these were analysed as described below. To further explore conceptions of SoTL, the statements made in application forms were also analysed. Finally, semi-structured focus group interviews, facilitated by a colleague not directly involved in the LC, were implemented. Group rather than individual interviews were employed to allow LC members to collectively explore their experiences of membership and thus identify and raise insights from experiences that were shared. Three interviews of three or four people were carried out; 10 of 12 members took part. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts and other data were anonymised prior to analysis.

Data analysis methods

Given the exploratory nature of this study it became clear that we needed to approach the research from an interpretivist theoretical perspective (Crotty 2003). Since our interview participants were limited to the twelve members of the LC (ten of whom participated in the research interviews - the schedules of the remaining two members precluded their participation) our sample size was fixed and we were aware that this meant that we would not be able to fulfil all of the requirements of grounded theory methodology to analyse interview data; theoretical sampling to ensure data saturation is a stipulated requirement for grounded theory (Punch 2005). However, we chose to use the well-described framework of grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1998) to analyse the interviews for the following reasons:

- Some members were familiar with this methodology

- Grounded theory aims to generate rather than verify theory – we had no theory at the beginning of our research, just individual and shared experiences.
- Grounded theory uses a systematic method of coding and concept generation which could be used by a group consisting of experienced and inexperienced researchers.

Briefly, the transcripts were read and coded independently by four individuals (JMCK, SB, JMcA, PR) who met at various points to discuss the themes and categories of themes that emerged until consensus was reached and the theory presented below formed.

Despite the fact that our participant sample was fixed, analysis of the interview data indicated that we did approach saturation i.e. no new concepts or categories emerged from the third group interview. However, to increase the validity of the research we: compared our developing theory with other forms of data (reflective statements and application statements); presented emerging categories and themes to the LC for comment and endorsement and, once theory had emerged in a raw form, used the literature ‘as further data to be fed into the analysis, but at a stage in the data analysis when theoretical directions have become clear’ (Punch 2005, 159). Below, each of the categories and their associated themes is presented, supported by illustrative quotes (all quotes are from the group interviews unless otherwise stated).

All the applicants’ statements and members’ reflections on SoTL were analysed using a general inductive approach as outlined by Thomas (2003). Findings

from this data were compared with the outcomes from the group interviews and illustrative quotes where these are used are indicated in the text.

Results

The experience of being a member of the Learning Community

Category 1: Common concerns

In applicants' supporting statements many stated a desire to become better teachers or to enhance student learning as reasons for wishing to join the LC, however, these reasons for joining were rarely stated during group interviews. It seems likely that applicants perceived these motivations would be viewed favourably during the selection process. In interviews, the two most consistent views expressed, regarding the reasons for joining the LC, were feelings of anxiety around both UTs' professional role and status and around SoTL itself; and a desire to establish relationships with other UTs. Thus the first category has been described as *common concerns* and comprises two themes: anxiety regarding the UT role and scholarship; and the desire for community.

Anxiety regarding the UT role and scholarship

Since the UT career track was fairly new there were concerns about career progression. Also, it was perceived that the academic nature of the UT role was not universally appreciated, and LC members perceived a lack of awareness amongst colleagues of the equity of UT and lectureship contracts, in terms of pay and conditions. Members also described confusion about the concept of scholarship and/or SoTL. In both initial written reflections and in group interviews much of the language used demonstrated a lack of clarity regarding what SoTL actually is. Members described the concept of SoTL as being cloudy, grey or fuzzy.

The whole scholarship idea was a bit cloudy in my head really anyway, so I thought it would be a good idea just to come and learn about that and work at it, to seriously engage with it, to see what it really meant.

The desire for community

As a research-intensive university, the UoG is made up of departments, located within faculties, engaged in both teaching and research activities. For many departments the basic unit of community is the research group; however, these communities were not generally available to UTs and in some cases members were the sole UT in their department. Many administrative and support structures are designed around research; the new academic activity of scholarship was often not yet recognised. The identity of UTs as academics was often not acknowledged by research-oriented colleagues. Feelings of isolation led to a desire for community, motivating at least some of those who applied for LC membership, as in this applicant's statement: 'I am aware of the value – even necessity – of having a community of like-minded individuals with whom to exchange ideas, refine one's thinking, and obtain practical advice.'

Category 2: Community

Perhaps the clearest feature to come out of the group interviews was the sense of feeling 'part of something' within and outside LC meetings. The LC started with a weekend retreat and, in the interviews, this was seen as very significant in terms of the LC as a whole and in terms of community formation in particular: 'Everybody kind of got together socially and professionally. ... The group just kind of formed. I think it wouldn't ... have worked as well if we hadn't done it at the beginning.' The

second category therefore is *community*, which comprises three themes. First is members' perception of the LC as a safe space. Second is members' recognition of the LC as a source of support. Third is members' feelings of being valued, in themselves and for their practice.

Finding a safe space

It was clear from the interview transcripts that participants were at ease in each other's company. Each of the interviews was punctuated by laughter; there was a sense of trust and safety that led to openness of discussions. As one participant, referring to the LC, put it: there are issues, 'that you wouldn't perhaps speak about in your own department but you could speak to somebody else, knowing that it was going to be confidential.' Members also described the group as a safe place to try things out or take risks.

I used my Critical Thinking Workshop that I had been planning to run and people from the Learning Community came along and helped me pilot that. And that was hugely useful. I don't know if I would have got another group of people that I would have felt as comfortable with.

In addition to the feelings of safety, there was also a sense of the regular meetings as personal 'space' to allow time for the consideration of professional activities: 'I think coming here every month ... makes you stop and think and reminds you that there are other things going on.'

Finding support

Members experienced support from the LC in a number of ways. They reported a clearer vision of whether they might or might not be engaged in SoTL: ‘I hadn’t looked at it as, you know, a theoretical area, which I needed to do. It definitely broadened it academically rather than just, you know, having an intuitive feeling of what was scholarship.’ Members also appreciated the opportunity to discuss and trial ideas or plans they had for teaching or SoTL projects. For instance, members learned about teaching and evaluation methods either through discussion or where these were modelled in regular meetings. Members also found the TDPs and the structured process of proposing a draft plan and having these critically reviewed by peers particularly useful: ‘To be able to present stuff that I thought was scholarship but was not really sure about and [to] receive feedback ... was great.’

Feeling valued

Given that members came from a position of relative confusion regarding their role and the concept of SoTL, it is not surprising that one of the clearest impacts of membership was an increase in confidence of the members. Finding that they were not alone in engaging in their endeavours was reassuring. There appeared to be a reassessment of their worth as individuals.

You know, it’s just what I do. It’s just what I teach. It’s just my class. It’s just the lab that I’ve done. It’s just the piece of work that I’ve developed. ... And suddenly you were thinking, well actually maybe I should be writing about this and maybe I should be telling other people about it.

Through involvement with the LC, members found that others valued the work they were doing and felt validated in their practice. They found themselves reconsidering what their practice entailed and what their professional role was.

Category 3: Empowerment

The final category of themes we have termed *empowerment* and this comes about from the emergence of two themes: redefining the issues surrounding SoTL and moving forward with their own approaches to SoTL.

Redefining the issues

Even at the end of the LC, members described how difficult it was to articulate their views of what SoTL is. However, while SoTL was still a ‘fuzzy concept’ there was less concern about the fuzziness:

I certainly have a slightly clearer notion of what scholarship is, it is still quite fuzzy and grey, but ... I think coming to the Learning Community and finding out that it’s fuzzy and grey for everybody else ... is better [group laughs] ... A shared fuzziness.

Members also described changes in the way that they approached scholarship: ‘The challenge then became not necessarily engaging ... in scholarship because I was already there, but just trying to evidence it in a way that other people recognise.’ There was a sense that members were no longer as concerned about the conceptual aspects of SoTL, but instead the focus had become trying to find ways of demonstrating engagement with SoTL.

Moving forward

Members talked about getting things done, of having concrete evidence of their SoTL. They reported success in projects or endeavours through their involvement with the LC: ‘that actually resulted in me getting a Learning and Teaching Development Fund award. And I would never have got that.’ Alongside this sense of achievement, there was a general sense of empowerment through group membership which, though less tangible, was real and is illustrated by the statement: “as a group or a cohort we have a voice”.

Discussion

The three categories of experience we describe above are: recognising and sharing *common concerns*, finding *community* and learning through it, and gaining *empowerment* as a consequence of LC membership.

The first category, common concerns contains two themes: anxiety with regard to the UT role and with scholarship/SoTL itself, and the desire for community. A decade ago, SoTL was described as ‘an amorphous term, equated more with commitment to teaching than with any concrete, substantive sense of definition or consensus as to how this scholarship can be recognized.’ (Menges and Weimer 1996, xii) and despite suggestions that SoTL ‘has gained much clearer contours over the past few years’ (Kreber 2002b, 151) it clearly remains a ‘fuzzy concept’ for practitioners new to this arena. Alongside this, UTs were expressing anxiety about their role and status. We are not postulating that all UTs at the UoG experienced either anxiety or the desire for community; however presumably, all who applied for LC membership either felt this anxiety and/or the desire for community

The second category describes the experience of community and the outcomes of that community. Central to the effectiveness of the LC was a sense of group cohesiveness which allowed members to experience the LC as a safe space. One contributing factor was that members came from a diverse range of subject areas; departmental ambitions were left behind. The experience of a safe space was also facilitated by early activities of the community, notably the retreat.

Within this safe space, members experienced support for their endeavours. This support was both practical, in terms of learning new skills and getting feedback on their SoTL projects, and more personal – the sharing of concerns led to feelings of affirmation and validation. Members felt an increased sense of their own worth and a greater sense of professional identity.

This leads on to the final category: ‘empowerment’. Empowerment has been defined by Page and Czuba (1999) as:

‘a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important.’

We therefore use the term empowerment in the sense of enabling UTs to engage in SoTL rather than in a more radical sense. Cox (2004) has described 10 qualities that he sees as essential for community in FLCs; these include empowerment. However, we would contend that empowerment was not a

predetermined quality of this LC but a result of the process of being part of the LC: an outcome rather than a starting position. Membership of the LC reduced the sense of anxiety about SoTL itself – if not about the role of the UT, as this remained a common concern. The issues surrounding SoTL were redefined and the focus of effort shifted. Rather than continuing to battle with the concept of SoTL itself, members found themselves concentrating on how to provide *evidence* that they were engaging in scholarship. The word *evidence* was used frequently in interviews. This is not surprising as many of the LC members had attended the UoG's first SoTL Symposium which had taken place the previous year and where the need to *evidence* SoTL had emerged from workshop discussions. In response to these discussions the institution had launched an online journal called 'The Practice and Evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education' (PESTLHE). Thus, 'to evidence SoTL' had become a new verb; an accepted part of members' language.

The relationship between the categories is temporal. The three categories we have presented broadly equate to members' experiences before, during and after the LC but this mapping is not quite so simplistic. For instance, as has been discussed above, there is still anxiety surrounding the area of the UTs' role and perceived status and, now that the LC has ended, elements of community continue to exist. However, the temporal nature of the emergent theory is not surprising given that the questions we wished to address were concerned with the changes individuals experienced through membership of the LC. The theory that emerged has parallels with community development models, in general, and with the concepts of social capital and transformative learning, in particular. Putnam (1993, 36) defines social capital as

‘features of social organization, such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.’ Social capital is said to be created when ‘the structure of relations among persons facilitates actions’ (Sampson 2008, 168). We would argue that the relations among LC members that were founded on common interest and a sense of trust have indeed facilitated action.

The relationships that developed within and outwith the LC, as well as the impact on the individual and the institution, are better understood when we consider three different forms of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking (Putnam 1993). Bonding social capital is the sense of security and identity that develops when strong bonds form within a social group. This was clearly seen in members’ experiencing the LC as a safe space. Secondly, bridging social capital refers to relationships established outwith individuals’ immediate environment. The LC brought together teachers from a variety of subject areas and fostered links across academic departments and faculties within the University. Furthermore, these links facilitated positive social action as members shared knowledge of teaching practice, offered support and encouragement to each other, and undertook/established collaborative projects. Thirdly, linking social capital refers to relationships between individuals belonging to different agencies or services. This linking social capital is evident through the LC’s dissemination activities both at institutional level through local conference presentations and to a wider audience through publications and international conference presentations (Bell et al 2006, Cox, MacKenzie and Pritchard 2006, MacKenzie and Morrow 2007). Overall, this demonstrates that membership of the LC afforded valuable social capital to the individual members involved. Furthermore, this social capital did not end when the formal meetings of the LC ended but has endured, resulting in further collaborative endeavours.

Our findings also have parallels with the concept of transformative learning, which has been described as ‘learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations ... – to make [learners] more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change’ (Mezirow 2003, 58).

Mezirow (2000, 22) describes 10 ‘phases of meaning’ and argues that transformational learning follows this 10-step process with some variation. Of particular relevance to the LC are four of these phases:

- A ‘disorienting dilemma’
- Recognising that ‘one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared’
- ‘Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships’
- Re-entering one’s life with a new, learned perspective.

Certainly, LC members entered the community with what could be described as a ‘disorientating dilemma’ – the confusion about scholarship/SoTL and the role of the UT. The LC process allowed members to recognise that their ‘discontent is shared’ with others and the supports members experienced built both ‘competence and self-confidence’ in their role. Finally, we argue that membership empowered members and allowed them to move forward and to reintegrate back into their working life with a new stance. We therefore argue that membership of the LC has resulted in transformation. As Cranton (2002, 64) state, if ‘an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view[,] ... critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has

transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world.’ The LC allowed members to collectively explore the way they approached SoTL and through shared critical examination they came away with a changed way of seeing the issues surrounding SoTL. The fact that this critical examination of SoTL was shared is, we believe, essential: as Grabove said (1997, 91): ‘transformative learning is a social rather than solitary process.’

Conclusions

This paper describes a LC designed to enable academic staff to engage in SoTL. The study demonstrates that members found a sense of community and were empowered in their SoTL work, thus addressing some of their initial concerns and anxieties. In terms of our initial research questions, membership of the LC has impacted positively on members’ approaches and attitude to SoTL, and their engagement and confidence with it and ultimately on their identities as practitioners.

We argue that LCs are useful for academic staff, in particular ‘teaching-focused’ academics, to enable the establishment of their professional identity and to find more meaning in their professional practice. We believe LC membership can result in better and more motivated teachers, whose enhanced practice should impact positively on the learning of their students. However, the impact of the LC described here would have been compromised had certain essential features been missing. Members came from a position of shared anxiety that focused their endeavours. This is not to say that such anxiety is essential; for a LC, a shared desire to implement changes in practice might equally be a starting position. Like Cox (2007) we argue that for effective community formation, members should come from different

professional backgrounds and subject areas to ensure the building of a safe space (by minimising direct competition) and to enhance the range and depth of experiences. Central to the argument presented here is that community formation is crucial to a LC's effectiveness. In forming a LC this must be made a priority by including social and group forming activities through retreats and/or social events (Cox 2004).

Membership of the LC was not without its challenges. Despite the overwhelming evidence that members valued the LC experience, it was clear that, in one sense membership contributed to rather than alleviated anxiety. Time was seen as a major issue. Involvement in the LC was additional to members' normal workload (meetings were at weekends and evenings) and was therefore a source of stress. Such additional stress might have been alleviated had membership of the LC been given formal recognition in terms of the members' continuing professional development; however, this was not possible due to the pilot nature of the exercise. A final note of concern shared by LC members was the issue of equity. Members were selected purely on their availability for a preferred meeting time, which was early evening. This disadvantaged those with family and other commitments and this should be taken into consideration when a LC is planned.

LCs could potentially be adopted to benefit many areas of academic practice. As has been demonstrated above, the benefits of LC membership can include enhancement of practice and a greater sense of feeling part of the institution. LCs could also be utilised by institutions to critically address, and potentially transform, aspects of teaching practice, in terms of considering how to better support learning. The contributions of members from different subject areas would potentially result in

more creative explorations of current challenges and concerns of HE. Further, although the LC described in this paper was intended as a practical support to help UTs engage with SoTL, it would seem that there is scope for future LCs to address the continuing ambiguities surrounding the definition of SoTL itself, so that staff are better informed and equipped to engage in the process.

Hyman (2008, 225) argues that community building ‘must begin by building relationships between community residents and that the social capital embedded in those relationships can be used to improve the welfare of both residents and the community.’ We have shown that the Glasgow LC impacted positively on the ‘welfare’ of its members and has brought about transformation in terms of members’ sense of academic professional identity and their approach to academic practice. We believe that such transformation will lead to benefits for the institutional community, including our students.

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