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## Celebrating 15 Years of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Georgia Southern University

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## Celebrating 15 Years of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Georgia Southern University

### Abstract

This letter from the editors of IJ-SoTL introduces our 15th Anniversary Special Issue, celebrating 15 years of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) at Georgia Southern University.

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## **Celebrating 15 Years of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Georgia Southern University**

### **A Letter from the Editors**

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This letter from the editors of *IJ-SoTL* introduces our 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Issue, celebrating 15 years of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) at Georgia Southern University.

With this issue we celebrate 15 years of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) at Georgia Southern University. Our focus here is on the history, the current state, and the future of the discipline at our institution. We have two invited essays, and four articles written by or in collaboration with Georgia Southern University faculty exploring various aspects of SoTL.

As we think about the future of this journal at Georgia Southern, we realize our good fortune to be working as members of a dedicated editorial team. In order to ensure a consistent level of quality and the on-time delivery of every issue, we have three content editors and one copy editor. This journal started with only one editor, who was responsible for everything associated with the editorial, production, and publication processes. And yet, even today, our editorial work (including maintaining and revising web page information, writing and revising policies, maintaining the reviewer database, managing reviews of submitted manuscripts, making decisions on those manuscripts, preparing them for publication, and actually pushing the finished articles to our host) takes place in conjunction with our regular full-time administrative or professorial obligations.

But all of this would come to naught were it not for our reviewers. Members of our Editorial Board also carve time out of their busy schedules to provide substantive reviews and feedback on manuscripts that are sent out to them. Their discerning readings throughout the years have been the backbone of our success.

Because of its nature, this special issue gave us the opportunity to create a special review board consisting of national and international SoTL leaders:

- **Nancy Chick**, Director of the Endeavor Center for Faculty Development at Rollins College and Past Co-President of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning;
- **Jennifer Friberg**, the Endowed Cross Chair in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Interim Director of the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology at Illinois State University;
- **Katarina Mårtensson**, Senior Lecturer in Higher Education Development at Lund University and Co-Editor of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*; and
- **Hillary Steiner**, Professor of Educational Psychology and Associate Director for SoTL at the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Kennesaw State University.

Their gracious acceptance of our requests, and their diligent work, certainly shows. We sincerely thank these SoTL leaders for their assistance in reviewing manuscripts submitted by Georgia Southern University faculty, thereby ensuring the quality of our celebratory special issue.

The first invited essay here reminisces about the early days, when the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning was new to Georgia Southern and to much of the globe. Alan Altany, the first editor of *IJ-SoTL*, offers a memoir documenting his discovery of SoTL and its contribution to his teaching/learning/scholarship. This memoir lays out Altany's personal journey of love and labor, of thrownness and challenge, and of a continuing coming to be through SoTL as a teacher and scholar. This early history of SoTL, generally—as well as specifically at Georgia Southern—documents the emergence and importance of establishing the Commons, wherein teaching becomes a public endeavor supported by the works of others, and not merely an isolated and isolating activity accomplished by the lone wolf.

The second invited essay, by Georgia Southern professor Trent Maurer, provides an in-the-moment reflection of SoTL practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. Maurer details how he leveraged his foundation in SoTL to respond to teaching through the early days of the pandemic. He describes how his understanding of students (and himself as teacher/learner) as humans experiencing chaotic live events and enduring uncertainty allowed him the flexibility, permission, and ability to shift and turn as the landscape presented new unprecedented challenges. He describes personal, professional and educational transformations throughout this essay.

In addition to these two essays, we have four articles for this special issue. First, Georgia Southern professor Diana Botnaru and colleagues examine the state of SoTL at Georgia Southern University, including perceptions of SoTL, levels of engagement and impact. Botnaru et al. found that Georgia Southern faculty perceive support at the departmental level and through the Faculty Center (formerly the Centers for Teaching Excellence) favorably, but feel much less favorable about support at the institutional level. Leveraging quantitative and qualitative data, the authors illustrate the positive impact of SoTL on course design and student learning, and present the case for increased support via institutional initiatives.

Sue Ellen DeChenne-Peters and Georgia Southern colleagues then provide an evaluation of student learning and attitudinal outcomes in face-to-face, hybrid, and online delivery variants of an introductory biology course-based undergraduate research experience (CUREs), comparing student outcomes between White/Asian students and persons excluded due to ethnicity or race (PEER). The authors found that while there were significant learning differences between course modalities, no significant learning differences existed by PEER status. These SoTL findings provide an evidence-based foundation for the adaptation of CUREs to online or hybrid modalities while ensuring continued support for student outcomes and also contribute to our understanding of online and hybrid laboratory experiences.

Next, Georgia Southern faculty Heather Scott and Lacey Huffling contribute the findings of a mixed-methods SoTL study that was prompted by the shift of an immersive, face-to-face, place-based professional development experience for middle and high school teachers to fully asynchronous online course delivery, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Their findings indicate that their porting of the experience was successful, with participants demonstrating positive outcomes and enjoyment of the self-paced learning via engaging outdoor activities adaptable to fit their physical locations. The authors describe the unique nature of teacher professional development and highlight how Covid-19 has created more online teaching opportunities. Their experience serves to inspire future SoTL work exploring place-based learning through online courses.

Rounding out the issue, Elizabeth Sargent and Georgia Southern colleagues present findings of a pilot study examining the effectiveness of Remote Mentoring of Undergraduate Research Students (ReMentURS), a system that was developed in response to online course offerings during the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors demonstrate the utility of ReMentURS and its application beyond Covid-19-related challenges. As higher education continues to evolve, remote access may actually fulfill its potential of democratizing higher education, and creative approaches that enhance teaching and learning are supported by the practice of SoTL.

As a whole, this issue provides a strong overview of the state of SoTL at Georgia Southern. We're sure that our experiences, at some level, can connect to almost every practitioner in the field, no matter the institution. Like the discipline itself, SoTL here began in passion and commitment. It channeled that energy into a form that insisted on reliability and repeatability, and so moved from something purely personal to something beneficial for all. Rooted in a concern for student learning, it has proven itself to be malleable, giving us adaptive tools and the means for evaluating their efficacy. Through the application of its principles we are weathering the ongoing storm of the Covid-19 pandemic, creating a continuity of instruction that, in effect, shields our students from most of the negative educational consequences this virus may have caused. Rigorous yet easily modified, passionate yet disinterested, the field itself creates its own present while forging a solid path forward by building on the best characteristics of its past. The desire for improvement is coupled with the best processes of evidence-based decision-making, and, as seen in this issue, its promise for the future is bright.