Making Teaching Matter More - The Making of a T1 University

Dr. Tara E. Prestholdt, University of Portland
Dr. Heather Dillon, University of Washington Tacoma

> Dr. Heather Dillon is Professor and Chair of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Washington Tacoma. Her research team is working on energy efficiency, renewable energy, fundamental heat transfer, and engineering education. Before joining academia, Heather Dillon worked for the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL) as a senior research engineer.

Dr. Eric Anctil, University of Portland

> Eric Anctil is a professor of media and technology in the School of Education at the University of Portland and the author of many books and articles on education. His work broadly centers on K-20 education and the nexus of media, technology, and the curriculum.

Dr. Carolyn McCaffrey James, University of Portland

> Dr. Carolyn James is the Calculus Coordinator at University of Portland in Oregon. As part of her role, she provides professional development to calculus faculty, oversees the training of undergraduate math tutors, and teaches in the math department. Her primary research interests include STEM faculty adoption of evidence-based practices, the relationship between instructor beliefs and practice, and institutional change of teaching cultures.

Prof. Stephanie Anne Salomone, University of Portland
Dr. Valerie J. Peterson, University of Portland

> Associate Professor of Mathematics

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Abstract

"Research I (R1) university" is a category that the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education uses to indicate universities in the United States that engage in the highest levels of research activity. There is currently no analogous classification for a T1 institution: institutions that engage in the highest levels of teaching activity. In Fall 2020, as part of an NSF IUSE project designed to enhance student-centered pedagogical practices and shift institutional culture, the research team hosted a symposium focused on the importance of teaching at the core of an institution. The attendees included 98 STEM faculty from several universities all interested in the topic of reflective teaching. Many of the participants had been trained in evidence-based instructional practices and faculty peer observation. A survey of participants asked these faculty to reflect on the idea of a T1 classification and how it might be framed in the broader conversation about enhancing STEM teaching. The survey responses were grouped based on change quadrants. The responses indicated alignment around reflective teaching, inclusive classroom practices, and recognition of excellence in pedagogy.

Introduction and Background

Institutional culture change has been an important topic in higher education for many years, but this is keenly felt in STEM fields, where much research has documented the benefits of student-centered pedagogies and the simultaneous struggle to promote the spread of such teaching methods [1, 2]. Evidence based instructional practices (EBIPs) and student-centered learning are two key aspects of institutional change [3, 4]. Literature has shown that when instructors have a fixed mindset, they are less likely to be successful in implementing classroom changes [5].

Reflective faculty peer observation has been a focus of recent culture change efforts in a group of Northwest universities [6–8]. The work has confirmed that discussions between faculty about teaching are an important part of supporting faculty in instructional change. The Redesigning Education For Learning through Evidence and Collaborative Teaching (REFLECT) team's research focuses on changing institutional culture towards acceptance of peer observation for teaching assessment. This supports inclusion of discipline-based educational research (DBER) as scholarship, in addition to sustainable, compensated professional development for all faculty. This project culminated in October 2020, with a virtual symposium on Evidence-Based Pedagogical Practices, *The Making of a T1 University*.

Unlike the Carnegie Classifications for research, there is currently no framework to indicate which higher education institutions have achieved teaching excellence, and the

symposium gathered faculty who believe that such a classification is both aspirational and important. We had over two dozen presentations, all exemplars of what teaching would look like at our vision of a T1 University. Our message, **"Your Teaching Matters. Make it Matter More**," centers *teaching as a scholarly act* and is important in dialogues about the purpose of higher education.

As a research team, we have consistently centered several questions about culture change for faculty in our work, which shaped our research questions.

1. How might we create culture change that encourages teaching excellence?

2. What motivates individual faculty to adopt and sustain new practices?

3. What supports a department or other unit in changing their structures and beliefs?

Methods

Our symposium was originally scheduled for March 2020, but the pandemic forced us to make adjustments to the format. We held a no-cost virtual symposium in October 2020. We advertised broadly using email listservs of PD leaders across STEM disciplines, disciplinary societies, and social media. Faculty and administrators registered to present posters, 20-minute talks, 40-minute talks, or 40-minute workshops. Ultimately there were ten sessions during the day: six for concurrent presentations or workshops (three per session), two for our guest and keynote speakers, one for posters, and one for closing remarks and a T1 Teaching Award (described below). Presentation topics concentrated on EBIPs, diversity and inclusion, student motivation, peer observation, and formative assessment.

Prior to the symposium attendees and presenters were emailed a welcome message and explanation of our T1 University vision. In addition, we invited the attendees to contribute to an online Jamboard to collect ideas on what an R1-equivalent classification might look like for elite teaching (see Table 1). The Jamboard was organized using the quadrants of Henderson et al.'s meta-analysis [9] into which they categorized institutional change initiatives: curriculum and pedagogy, reflective teachers, policy, and shared vision. The interactive nature of the Jamboard allowed us to call upon it repeatedly throughout the day and ultimately summarize emergent and prescribed practices and strategies that promote a teaching-focused culture at both the individual and systems levels.

Attendees and presenters were also emailed an invitation to submit a T1 teaching idea describing how they practice and promote effective, innovative teaching. Submissions ranged from specific habits instructors employ with individual students or entire classes to particular activities that engage learners. Based on these submissions, a winning idea was chosen for the T1 Teaching Award at the end of the symposium.

The symposium was attended by 98 faculty and administrators from 47 different institutions. Attendees represented a variety of institution types from R1 institutions, community colleges, and academies, the majority of which were in the USA. All ranks were

represented (including graduate students and post-doctoral faculty), but the majority were Assistant or Associate Professors (i.e., early careers rather than later careers).

While the symposium was designed to allow faculty members to share specific teaching tools and techniques, we wanted to understand more about culture change. To explore this, we created a post-symposium survey to prompt participants to think deeply about the question of culture change. There were two open-ended questions (n = 21 responses):

1. Research I (R1) university is a category that the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education uses to indicate universities in the United States that engage in the highest levels of research activity. There is currently no analogous classification for a T1 institution: institutions that engage in the highest levels of teaching activity. What is your vision of a T1 University? (Please try to articulate 2-3 specific aspects of your vision.)

2. How did your participation in the REFLECT Symposium change your vision of a T1 institute? Please explain.

Results

Our discussions in the symposium confirmed that many institutional changes are important to make the classification of teaching-focused universities a reality. Specific practices, habits, and qualities were identified by the participants in the survey results, and we have grouped them by the change quadrants developed by Henderson et al. [9] using the same structure as the interactive brainstorming session.

Several themes emerged in each quadrant as shown in Table 1. The first was the idea of supporting experimental and innovative pedagogical methods with institutional funding. The idea of self-reflection, primarily for faculty, was a focus of several comments. In the policy quadrant, participants pointed to changing promotion and tenure guides to provide clarity about teaching excellence, while not inflating the value of student evaluations.

As part of the second survey question, many respondents discussed how the symposium had changed thinking about the idea of a T1 institution. The following quotes capture important ideas about this work that may be useful for the teaching community to consider.

● "I really appreciated spending time in a community that values and discusses education in this collaborative atmosphere. Although I am at a primarily teaching institution, it has been difficult to find such explicit camaraderie in my department. My vision of a T1 institution was changed by an increased awareness of the variety of 'radical' progressive approaches to education that are being developed."

● "I think that many times I think of teaching as what happens inside the classroom, when T1 teaching (and a T1 institution) is also as much about what happens outside of the classroom."

Table 1. Summary of the types of comments for "What is your vision of a T1 University?" from the survey results (n=21) organized by quadrant and number of comments. The number of comments aligned with each theme is shown in parenthesis.

Curriculum and Pedagogy	Reflective Teachers
● **Institutional funding supports experimental pedagogy (6)**	● **Students and faculty engage in self-reflection (5)**
● Implement culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogies (4)	● Discuss pedagogy with students (1)
● Project-based learning that supports R1 and T1 goals (1)	● Frequent self-evaluation of teaching is required (1)
● Teachers develop and work from de-colonized syllabi (1)	● Assessment methods emphasize the formative and not the summative (1)

| Policy	Shared Vision
● **Clarity and value on teaching vision as part of promotion and tenure (10)**	● **Great teaching is honored (5)**
● Promotion and tenure evaluation that does not inflate the value of student evaluations (5)	● Quantify progress toward teaching excellence and EBIPs (4)
● Teaching faculty are valued in the same way as research faculty (5)	● Committees with a focus on community growth in teaching (3)
● Peer review of teaching as part of promotion and tenure (3)	● Lecture-based methods are actively discouraged in the unit culture (3)
● DEI action in teaching is a clear part of the promotion and tenure requirement for promotion (2)	● Discuss pedagogy frequently in community (e.g., department meetings) (2)
● Formal and informal student mentoring is acknowledged and compensated (2)	● Collaboration with colleagues across campus on course design (1)
● Funding that supports first-generation and underrepresented student success (2)	● Build teaching focus and culture into the hiring process (1)
● Student-centered grading practices (1)	● Safe classroom environments are designed to support students and faculty in exploration (1)
● Enlist accreditation agencies to support teaching excellence (1)	● Students have a voice in what makes teaching impactful (1)
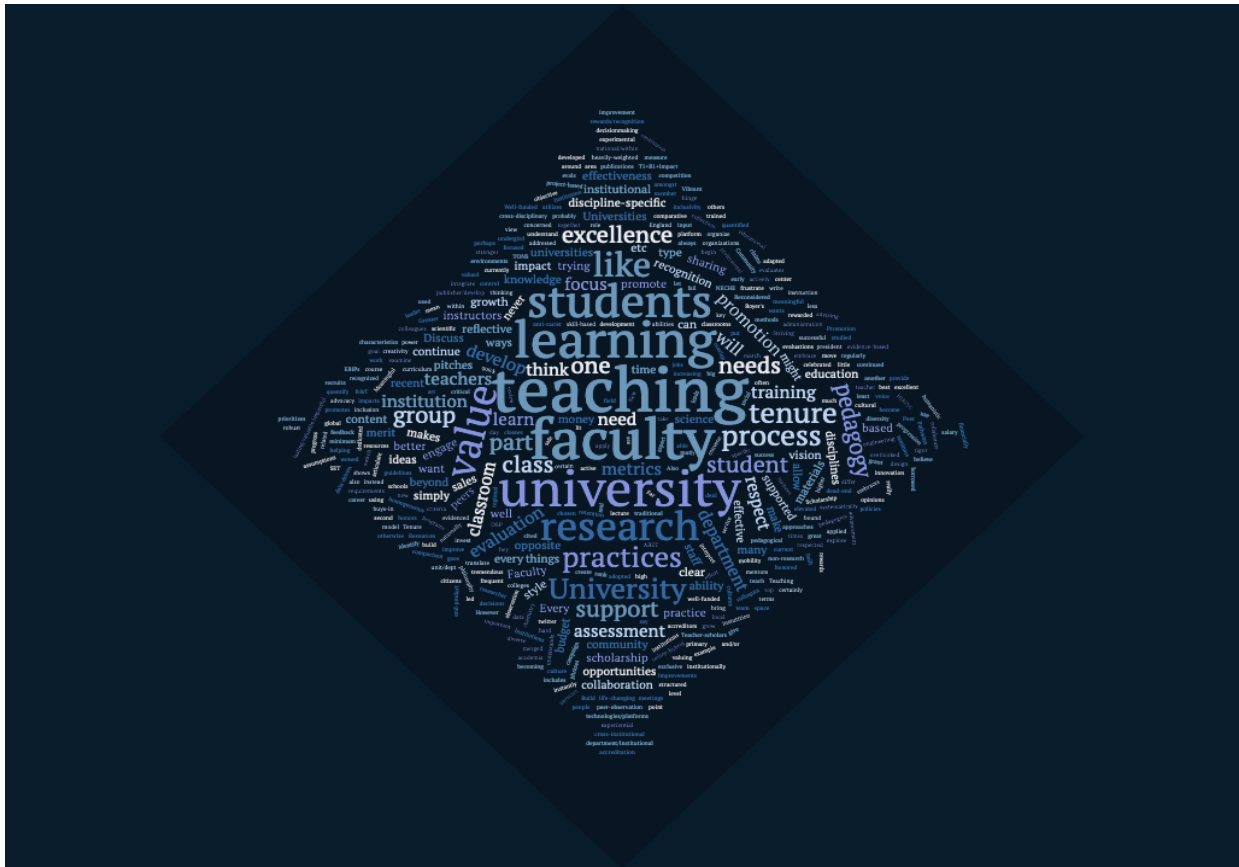
Figure 1. Word cloud and stats from the survey responses.

- "I have always believed in the power of individual faculty choices. I have encountered enough resistance to change within my department that I feel like giving up on changing the culture of the department. This symposium has given me hope that I can find partners in this endeavor outside of my department as well as within my department. It truly will take a cultural shift within my department, college, and university, but it is worth fighting for."

Conclusions

During a virtual symposium in Fall 2020 a group of faculty interested in teaching developed a set of ideas around how we might envision a T1 university, an analogue to the Carnegie Classification of R1 for research-focused institutions. Several of the participants observed that while T1 might be a noble goal, the realization of the ideals of a T1 for any university would be rooted in continuous improvement. The journey, and how our communities travel toward this goal together, may well be the most important aspect of the T1 university we hope to create.

To support this journey, it is important to empower change agents in institutions and support them with an external network that will help them alter the communities they

work in. Symposiums like the one hosted as part of the NSF REFLECT project offer one mechanism to support such change agents. We hope to continue this important community building in future national workshops of this type.

We plan to use the insights and content summarized in Table 1 to expand this conversation at a national level. We invite partners in this work and hope you might consider a conversation with your colleagues about the topic of T1 universities.

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