

Investigating CALS Faculty Knowledge and Perception of Social, Behavioral, and Educational Research and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Shelbie Dalton
Mississippi State University
215 Lloyd Ricks Watson
Mississippi State, MS 39762
662-325-7834
sgd71@msstate.edu

Dr. Gaea Hock
Kansas State University
315 Umberger Hall
Manhattan, KS 66506
785-532-1166
ghock@ksu.edu

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Introduction/Literature Review

Educators must understand the importance of sharing teaching methods and learning from each other to continue to improve the efficiency of teaching ever-changing curriculum. The ability to conduct, write, and publish social, behavioral, and educational (SBE) research is a vital aspect of the education profession. Most SBE research requires approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for use of human subjects. Understanding how to apply for IRB approval is necessary for publishing research (Institutional Review Board, n.d.)

One important type of SBE research is typically known as SOTL or Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. “The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) uses discovery, reflection, and evidence-based methods to research effective teaching and student learning.” (What is the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)?, n.d.) Scholarship of Teaching and Learning could improve the effectiveness of teaching and provide guidance for prospective faculty (McKinney, 2013). If a teacher cares about being a good teacher, he/she is practicing the scholarship of teaching and learning (Meyers, 2007).

Conceptual Framework

This study was framed by Boyer’s idea of scholarship of teaching (Boyer, 1990), which we now call scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). This type of inquiry centers on an effort to improve teaching and learning through purposeful study and examination. While he promoted SoTL as its own category of research, he recognized that it works in conjunction with other research efforts.

Methodology

Survey research was conducted in an effort to measure Mississippi State University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) faculty’s knowledge and confidence of conducting, writing, and publishing SBE and SoTL research. The survey was researcher-created and contained three sections. The sections consisted of demographic, SBE research and the institutional review board (IRB) process, and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) questions. The survey was emailed to the CALs (N = 225) via a third-party list serve. Dillman’s Tailored Design method (Dillman, 2000) was used to send the emails and reminder emails to participants.

There were three research objectives for this research study:

1. Explore CALs faculty’s knowledge and perception of SBE research and the IRB process.
2. Identify faculty’s current use and interest in SoTL.
3. Investigate CALs faculty recommendations for IRB and SoTL research.

Results

The survey was administered in the 2016 Spring semester. There were 49 respondents (22% response rate); with 67% ($n = 32$) males, 41% ($n = 20$) assistant professors, and each of the nine departments in the college represented.

For the first research question, 63% ($n = 31$) of respondents know what to publish when conducting SBE research, but 20% ($n = 10$) respondents did not know how to share SBE research. Thirty-five (74%) participants indicated they would conduct social, behavioral, and

educational research at least every other year if they were informed about the IRB process, but 31 respondents (67%) did not indicate interest in attending a workshop about the IRB process. There were 28 respondents who believed their research was worth sharing. The majority of the respondents (n=43) recorded that they would use their colleagues research to improve their methods of teaching.

In response to research objective 2, almost two-thirds (60%, n = 25) of respondents had never previously conducted SoTL research, but the same number reported an interest in attending a workshop about how to conduct SoTL research. Respondents would be more likely to conduct SoTL research if they received national recognition (n = 26) or if they could publish their research internationally (n = 28).

Research objective three aimed to investigate CALS faculty recommendations for IRB and SoTL research. CALS faculty indicated SoTL is research that benefits students' education and improves pedagogical methods. SoTL has allowed faculty to be more reflective about their teaching methods by having data or narrative to compare with learning objectives. It also helps faculty recognize and follow best practices. SoTL provides a basis for continual improvement and allows faculty to keep up to date on new advances in teaching methodologies. SoTL increases the likelihood of successful instruction.

Conclusions

There is interest by CALS faculty in learning more about SBE research, but the low response rate could display a lack of interest by CALS faculty in improving social, behavioral, and educational research. The low response rate also does not allow for a generalized view to the larger population of faculty. The conclusions that were drawn from the SBE research section were that 74% of the respondents would conduct SBE research if they were informed about the IRB approval process; however, 67% of the respondents did not indicate interest in attending a workshop about the IRB approval process. A majority of the respondents had not conducted SoTL research previously, so there could be a lack of demonstrated importance among the CALS faculty to practice the scholarship of teaching and learning. The respondents are interested in learning more about SoTL research and would likely practice SoTL if they were more educated on the process and motivated to share their findings. CALS faculty are not interested in a workshop on the IRB process, therefore, the IRB office of compliance should be more effective in educating faculty members on how to publish their research. It was confirmed that those who have conducted SoTL research indicate it improves instruction.

Recommendations

It is recommended more clarification of the IRB approval process in regards to SBE research be practiced. The Mississippi State University Office of Research Compliance can better communicate when to use the IRB process when conducting SoTL research. Also, CALS should emphasize and promote SoTL in an effort to enhance teaching and learning across the college. One way to encourage more SoTL projects could be to provide incentives for faculty members to conduct, write, and publish social, behavioral, and educational research. Workshops on SoTL would give faculty confidence in conducting research. A website could be created to share various faculty research findings on the scholarship of teaching and learning within the college. Finally, faculty should be encouraged to mentor each other in an effort to improve SoTL research practices throughout the college.

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