Improving Student Engagement in Political Science Courses Through Application of Active Learning and Digital Learning Technologies

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter explores the experiences and benefits gained from participation in Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University Provost's Digital Learning Initiative (DLI) Fellowship. Participants were equipped with relevant tools for re-designing courses for increased student engagement and attainment of student learning outcomes. The program promoted expertise in retooling courses to promote student-centered learning by exposing students to digital learning tools that reflect current and emerging technology trends in higher education as well as best practices in implementation of active learning strategies. The focus was on application of technology and implementation of active learning practices in two political science courses: a research methods and general education course. These insights have improved the author's professional development competencies; importantly, the implementation of technology-based learning has resulted in improved student achievement as evidenced by summative and formative assessment measures, and the acquisition of research and analytical skills.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter serves two purposes: In the first place it is a reflection on my experience as an inaugural Digital Learning Initiative (DLI) Fellow. The DLI Fellowship program was established by the Office of the Provost of Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) in 2017 in an effort to promote more student-centered learning by retooling existing courses to better reflect current and emerging technology trends in higher education.

Secondly, it sets out how my application of learning from the program to re-design and change teaching and delivery in two political science courses: POS 4703: Scope & Methods of Political Science and POS 2112: American State and Local Government. Scope and Methods of Political Science was the course I chose for re-design as a requirement of the Fellowship; however, in the course of the DLI training and following insights gained from a best-practice conference, I decided to incorporate new techniques and modalities into the American State and Local Government course.

A number of active-learning tools and strategies were introduced into the political science research methods course in efforts to re-design it. In the same breath, innovative digital learning tools were introduced into the American State and Local Government course. Students were not only exposed to but also assisted in the application of the tools in exercises and course projects.

The primary goal of course re-design and implementation of new technologies in teaching was the enhancement of student engagement with content material. The DLI Fellowship program provided valuable opportunity to learn about tools for improving student engagement with the course in general; and in particular, ways to assist students to gain mastery of content knowledge. In addition, new learning from the Fellowship workshops afforded opportunity to redirect my teaching toward achievement of student learning outcomes with regard to communication. This relates to assisting students to learn the language and registers of the political science discipline in a way that they can communicate ideas effectively while undertaking written assignments and research tasks.

As well, participation in the fellowship program has placed me in a better position to assist students to think critically and acquire critical thinking skills which they can utilize for career readiness and problem solving. In sum, the program has equipped me with relevant skills and preparation to contribute to the attainment of our university, college, and departmental-level