INTRODUCTION

The scholarship on student-centeredness is primarily focused on individual classroom pedagogy. Grebennikov and Shah (2013) conducted a recent study that delved into the trends in perceived importance and performance of various university services and main issues that a particular university had been addressing to enhance student experience. One of their findings was that it is the total experience of the university that shapes students’ judgments, not just what happens in the classroom. As stated by Cahill, Turner, and Barefoot (2010), “higher education managers should ensure that institutional strategies and infrastructures promote the improvement of student learning and the students learning experience” (p. 292). Cullen, Harris, and Hill (2012) also took student-centeredness beyond the classroom and asked academic leaders to consider the broader implications of making their institutions fully learner-centered.

This paper focuses on how higher learning institutions can progressively implement the effectual art of bridging theory and practice with the perpetual aspiration of achieving campus-wide praxis. “Ideally, theoretical constructs and real world practice should be closely related” (Williams, Sánchez, & Hunnell, 2011). Praxis denotes doing or action: the exercise or practice of an art, skill, or science (Chapman, 1999). Acquiring content knowledge of a particular field or discipline through higher education alone is not enough. Jarvis (as cited in Chapman, 1999) explained that there is content knowledge and process knowledge. The former concept indicates why and the latter indicates how (Chapman, 1999). The ‘learning while doing’ approach relies on data and on adjusting the organization’s implementation plan and the underlying ways of operating (Kerman, Freundlich, Lee, & Brenner, 2012).

The explanatory analysis of the campus presented in the following manuscript is part of a university that prides itself on being a teaching institution with professional and career orientations. The campus offers its students hands-on experiences, with laboratory learning practice embedded in the curriculum. Curriculum is at the heart of what higher education does. To truly effect change, the curriculum needs to be examined and aligned with learner-centered practices (Cullen, Harris, & Hill, 2012). Research shows that students are better able to effectively apply principles when instruction is combined with experiential learning (Grover & Stovall, 2013). The university is committed to experiential education, which continues to serve an integral part of the institution’s identity. Through an interdisciplinary approach to learning, the campus in question has sought to build and expand the notion of campus community to develop a culture of praxis wherein theory meets practice within and without the classroom. The concept of praxis challenged the higher education conventions of faculty versus administration, student affairs versus academic affairs, and the master teacher syn-
Building an Academic Culture of Praxis

The master teacher syndrome is the antithesis of instructor lifelong learning: it is the belief that competent teaching is a finite feat that requires no additional development. Progressive pedagogues are constantly reorienting, flexible, and evolving (Morris, 2013).

This article addresses and extends knowledge in the areas of student-centered education, praxis, and assessment. It reports the results of a university campus that executed a holistic, student-centered initiative that effectively melded academic and professional orientations (i.e., theory and practice). The paper reviews the pedagogical literature pertaining to student-centered learning and praxis. It relates how a particular college campus philosophically and conceptually aligned the academic experience with industry skills. The amalgam is at some level irrelevant, because highly effective instructors in industry and the professions intuitively share both traits. The idea that academic orientations and professional orientations are schismatic is foreign to the instructor that possesses academic and professional orientations (i.e., theory and practice). The paper reviews the pedagogical literature pertaining to student-centered learning and praxis. It relates how a particular college campus philosophically and conceptually aligned the academic experience with industry skills. The amalgam is at some level irrelevant, because highly effective instructors in industry and the professions intuitively share both traits. The idea that academic orientations and professional orientations are schismatic is foreign to the instructor that possesses academic and professional orientations (i.e., theory and practice).

Enhancing the Student Experience

In student-centered environments, the student often determines the learning goal, the means to support learning, or both (Hannafin, 2012; as cited in Hannafin, Hill, Land, & Lee, 2014). Despite espousing student- or learner-centered classroom teaching practices, teachers often employ didactic, teacher centered approaches (Polly & Hannafin, 2011; Johnston, 2009). Terms such as self-directed, self-controlled, autonomous, and independent have become ubiquitous in contemporary educational discourse. Their pervasiveness causes them to be used casually, which does not often reflect the high level of responsibility and expectation that is placed on the student (St. Neill & McMahon, 2005). The educational process benefits when learners become partners in the teaching process (Hein, 2012) rather than being required to listen to didactic oriented instructors providing them with information to be absorbed. If learners are required to develop a “can-do” attitude (Jones, 2007). It is effective, motivating, and enjoyable. Stukalina (2010) regarded student motivation as an essential factor for the educational environment’s quality improvement. The more that these students develop a student-centered learning setting requires a concern for how students learn and a mind shift towards grooming students to become self-directed learners (Feurer, 2009). As learners become accountable, they develop responsibility for their own learning, the use of technological tools becomes more effective (Cullen, Harris, & Hill, 2012). Student learning should be viewed holistically, by examining each element of the learning process. Thus, matching and aligning those elements with an academic experience that is intentionally designed to reach the totality of what constitutes a student becomes likely. The discussion inevitably leads to the underlying goal for student development and the pursuit of student ownership of their education. Hence, a student-centered focus symmetrically relates to or, at the very least, leads to self-directed learning (i.e., autodidacticism). The pursuit of a measured student-centered learning environment can be realized for the student experience (Zubaite, 2012; Wright, 2011; Polly & Hannafin, 2011; Azevedo, Beihnag, Duffy, Harley, & Trevors, 2012; Lewis & Reinders, 2008, as cited in Feuer, Given-King, & Low, 2009). Egle, Navarre, and Nixon, (2011) affirmed the student-centered, discussion-based classroom and its values of multiplicity, diversity, opportunity, and democratic process. When a college or university prioritizes and seeks to facilitate the needs of students first, they tend to be more student-centered rather than faculty-centered (Wright, 2011). Ayn and Class (2011) concluded, “The power of student-centered instruction arises in large part from students’ responses to the fundamental question: ‘Am I the teacher?” (2011: 4). Worthwhile instructional episodes can be realized for students (Polly & Hannafin, 2011). The difference is placed on the student (O’Neil & McMahon, 2005). The high level of responsibility and expectation that students are asked to address, while there may be limitations to establishing a student-centered environment, requires incremental steps of preparation to the student experience to eventually reach an authentic student-centered campus. Figure 1 shows how an entire organizational team can facilitate the student experience strategy in praxis. Sixty-five percent of college professors report that what is taught in high school does not prepare students for college (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). Far too many high school graduates enter college without the basic content knowledge, skills, or habits of mind they need to succeed (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). The student campus population at the time was nearly one-third white, one-third black, one-third Hispanic, making it rather culturally diverse. In terms of age, the student average was 18 years of age. Considering this, the campus examined how student learning was affected by: student learning styles, demographics, academic achievement before entering college, placement scores, and study skills.
From each of these contributing factors emerged the need for deliberate and strategic faculty development. Campus faculty members were reputed for their passion, industry knowledge, and love for students. There was a case for the faculty to be immersed in focused teaching and learning developmental training activities that would address the needs of the students. Connecting the student experience (classroom instruction, faculty interaction, industry preparation) to rigor can occur through deliberate engagement by faculty. The following four areas of concentration led to giving students a balanced education:

1. Starting at orientation and continuing through their academic career, students were introduced to basic learning competencies, termed Essential Learning Competencies (ELCs): interpretation, analysis, problem solving, critical thinking, and higher order thinking. These competencies are at the core of all campus learning and create sound thought processes from which all future learning takes place.
2. Students received experiential learning components that can be observed and measured within each of their courses. Kolls defined experiential learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (as cited in Grover & Stovall, 2013, p. 1). Classroom projects were delivered with depth, breadth, and understanding of all levels of higher order thinking. Co-curricular events and projects also demonstrate a richer format through the integration of the critical thinking theory; meets practice.
3. Wherever possible, an interdisciplinary approach is used to further challenge students to think critically and about all the areas a particular problem or situation may influence a decision or outcome. The CAT Instrument was a unique tool designed to assess and promote the improvement of critical thinking and real-world problem solving skills. The instrument is the product of extensive development, testing, and refinement with a broad range of institutions, faculty, and students across the country. (Center for Assessment & Improvement of Learning, 2014)
4. Through an ongoing teaching and learning initiative sponsored by the university, faculty cohorts designed acceptable minimal standards for writing, oral communication, and information literacy. The specific communication criteria were two areas of focus during the introductory rollout of the teaching and learning initiative. The first was working with faculty to consistently connect the ELCs in all classroom deliveries. The second was getting students to recognize the ELCs when they are being applied. Students were introduced to the ELC program through their college orientations, a fall introductory class, meetings with their academic advisors, and through classroom instruction. The ELCs became a talking point that was referenced on screen savers of all student-accessed computer monitors, office tents, and classroom posters. Faculty examined assignments, exams, and projects to ensure that delivery methods emphasized interpretation, analysis, problem solving, critical thinking, and higher order reasoning. A survey sample of 160 students responded to a questionnaire, in which they identified that they understood most of the ELCs. Nonetheless, critical thinking and higher order reasoning was consistently misinterpreted by the students sampled. In response, three faculty members went to a national conference on assessment training. They were trained on delivery and assessment of critical thinking. They subsequently trained ten other faculty members through a formalized teaching and learning initiative.

A random sampling of 200 hundred seniors across colleges were administered a Critical Assessment Test (CAT). The test was developed by Tennessee Technological University and is used by higher education institutions throughout the United States to assess critical thinking intelligence quotient.

The ELC Initiative, the ELCs are a shared philosophy for teaching and learning. It is important to note that the type of collaborative process required for such an endeavor is not typically a part of the culture of higher education, which places a premium on individual faculty autonomy (Henderson, Finkelstein, Beach, & 2010). Nevertheless, ELCs help the campus by providing more specific definitions to ensure an appropriate balance between student engagement and rigor. Competent teachers have always called to the low end and vectored to the high side. In this instance, the primary expected outcome of creating the ELC initiative was to encourage faculty and students to overtly specify, identify, articulate, reflect and provide feedback, utilizing specific competencies:

1. interpretation, analysis,
2. problem solving,
3. critical thinking,
4. and higher order thinking.

Policies and practices that enhance student engagement with feedback may build students’ sense of responsibility and ownership for their learning (Handley, Price, & Miller, 2011). There were two areas of focus during the introductory rollout of the teaching and learning initiative. The first
Experiential Learning & Co-Curricular (Integrative learning). The charge to all campus faculty members was to continue to develop experiential learning components that could be observed and measured within each of their courses. Many remarkable interactive examples emerged that were strengthened through the application of the ELCs. Classroom projects were delivered with much more depth, breadth, and higher order thinking skills. Course and campus-wide co-curricular events and projects also demonstrated a richer format through the integration of the ELCs (e.g., Arts & Sciences Fair, Entrepreneurship Context, Leadership Cultural Immersion Symposiums, Conference, Management Course Business Simulations, and dramatic interactive plays performed by students taking the Drama Studies course).

Interdisciplinary pedagogical approach.

The academic community began to connect disciplines where possible to encourage instructors to seek out deliberate and meaningful ways to connect relevant disciplines to further challenge students to think critically. For example, Leadership course faculty partnered with Media Relations course faculty, Fashion Merchandise & Retail Marketing faculty partnered with Culinary Arts faculty, Sport Entertainment & Event Management/Marketing faculty partnered with Marketing and Management faculty. This faculty community identified experientially-based projects to foster collaboration. One such project was the development of Cultural Engagement Leadership Conference designed to leverage the campus’ diversity through leadership exercises that allowed disciplines to intersect. The approach does not supersede or conflict with the university system’s outcomes assessment work. The above initiative does not add or subtract from SLOs present. However, it was not clearly articulated or being consistently delivered.

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CONCLUSIONS

Student-centered, inquiry-rich, and cognitively complex disciplines of inquiry and/or activities are sometimes referred to as constructivist methods (Merry, 2013), and were extended beyond the classroom at the campus described above. An initiative that bridged theory and practice led to the achievement of the goal of faculty praxis. Five foci guided the campus to reach the organizational culture of praxis. The ELC model described encourages higher student thinking under the guidance of a facilitating professor. ELCs that represented a shared campus praxis philosophy of teaching and learning led the academic community to the opportunity to frame where academic and professional orientations converge. Faculty members incorporated the ELCs into their classes with great student learning results. Following the ELC Initiative roll-out, many on-campus faculty and staff members were actively seeking to embed the ELCs into their courses. Organizational culture gives an organization identity (Cheung, Wong, & Wu, 2011) and can determine organizational results (Jacobs, Manson, Davis, et al., 2013; Azevedo, R., Behnagh, R. F., Duffy, M., Harley, J. M., Azevedo, R., Behnagh, R. F., Duffy, M., Harley, J. M., & Asif, F. (2011). Estimating the impact of Denison’s (1996), "What is the difference between organizational culture and organizational climate? A native point of view on a decade of paradigm wars. The Pacific Journal of Science and Technology, Volume 6 (5) 454-459. Retrieved from http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0148296310000706

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**APPENDIX**

Note. The background shows progressive classroom elements that can be used toward moving toward praxis. The order and positioning of their appearance does not represent any particular sequence or hierarchy.