

## **Professional Development in a Pandemic: The 2020 Emergency Management and Homeland Security Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Focus Group**

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### **ABOUT THE 2020 SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING**

This essay shares the journey and experiences of emergency management (EM) and homeland security (HLS) academics' professional development in the midst of the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. While EM and HLS faculty are skilled in teaching competencies required to navigate the complex and chaotic environments of disaster, teaching and learning during a disaster adds another dimension of uncertainty. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Higher Education (HiEd) Program's 2020 scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) focus group demonstrated a strong commitment to learning, creative agility, diversity of thought, and meaningful faculty collaboration to ensure the continued advancement of SoTL for the academic disciplines of EM and HLS. SoTL is the systematic study of evidence-based teaching and learning.

### **PLANNING**

January 2020 was the time to select the 2020 SoTL focus group. This was the fourth year U.S. higher education faculty were selected to attend the annual American Education Research Association's (AERA) conference to actively participate in the event sessions and represent the EM and HLS academic disciplines. The AERA conference is a very large gathering of education researchers: typically, more than 10,000 people attend the conference and over 2,500 sessions are held. It is an energizing experience. In prior years, SoTL groups have attended the AERA conference in San Antonio, Texas (2017), New York, New York (2018), and Toronto, Canada (2019). This year the conference was scheduled to convene in San Francisco, California. The SoTL focus group identified three mentors from the prior year's attendees and met to prepare the Call for Applicants for this year's focus group. The deadline for application was February 21 and by February 27, the mentors had completed their ratings and successful applicants were notified of their selection. Everything seemed to be moving along as expected, even though we were beginning to pay attention to the growing spread of COVID-19 from China.

On March 4, we hosted our first SoTL focus group planning meeting video conference with all nine participants. We discussed the statement of work, the location, and expectations. The focus group was enthusiastic to attend and learn together. On March 6, however, 21 people tested positive for the COVID-19 on a cruise ship off the coast of San Francisco. A few days after this, AERA announced that the upcoming conference would meet remotely. AERA hosted briefing and listening sessions with the community at various times between March 10–13 to discuss their

decision and plans for a virtual conference. While the SoTL focus group was disappointed, we were hopeful that we could still learn and engage in meaningful dialogue to advance the SoTL for our disciplines. An added bonus was that the AERA conference would be open and free to anyone to attend, so we were able to invite more EM-HLS stakeholders.

The SoTL focus group started thinking of how we could still convene and virtually engage as a collective, which was short lived as U.S. states, colleges, universities, and training centers began significantly curtailing travel and gatherings. At this point one mentor and one faculty member had to withdraw from the group. The mentor was a County level emergency manager whose jurisdiction was experiencing a spike in COVID-19 cases and the faculty member was immersed in international response and recovery efforts. Two alternatives for the focus group were added to the team. On March 23, AERA cancelled the conference so as to not interfere with attendees' personal and professional needs. This was the first conference AERA cancelled since World War II.

### **OUTCOMES**

During all the twists and turns in the planning, the statement of work was evolving too. There was no longer a need for travel. We needed to think about how we could make the best use of our time together. The SoTL group had already committed to collectively develop the EM and HLS disciplines using working papers that identified and evaluated ongoing SoTL initiatives and programs. In addition, each member would produce a reflection paper that delineated their SoTL 2020 experiences. The group also agreed to present their findings at FEMA's 2020 EM HiEd Symposium in June, review and discuss the prior SoTL focus group reports, and to submit one of the manuscripts to the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) conference to be held in November 2020 in New Orleans, Louisiana.

On April 17, the date we initially expected to be at the opening of the AERA conference in San Francisco, we convened via video conference. For nearly two hours, we discussed the prior focus group reports, the current state of SoTL in our academic disciplines, approaches to grow SoTL research in our discipline, and the nexus of continuous improvement in how we educate the next generation of EM and HLS professionals. We also discussed expectations of continued work and deliverables. It was good to hear different perspectives and to see the faces of focus group members on the screen, yet it fell wildly short of in-person gatherings, debating what we learned and having meals together in a physical environment. On June 2, the group successfully presented their work and learning at the HiEd Symposium, which was delivered via Zoom. On July 8, the manuscript submitted to ASHE titled "The Challenges Posed by COVID-19: Access and Inclusion in EM On-line Education" was accepted to what was now going to be a virtual conference.

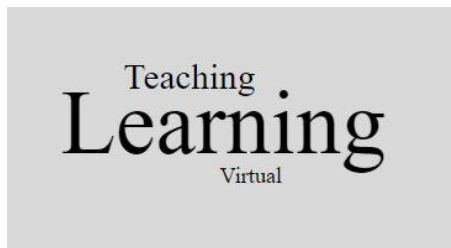
The focus group mentors reviewed the SoTL focus group reports from 2017–2019 to better understand the themes and prior ideas for action. They delivered a short write up conveying a consistent desire to develop a SoTL agenda; create effective feedback loops between practitioners, researchers, and educators; and to embrace learning outcome-based design strategies. There is a need to grow the SoTL body of knowledge relevant to EM and HLS teaching and the 2020 manuscripts will be a step in that direction. Focus group members further



Figure 2. Word Cloud 2



Figure 3. Word Cloud 3



### CONCLUSION

A “passion for learning” may be the common denominator for these scholars. SoTL members’ passion to learn more and advance the empirical research of how teaching and learning occurs within the EM and HLS disciplines was strong enough that they persist through the challenges presented in a global pandemic.