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Work-Integrated Learning Special Section: Editors' Introduction

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning on Work-Integrated Learning: International and Multi-Institutional Research

ABSTRACT

This special section offers readers of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry (TLI)* a deep-dive into recent international, multi-institutional scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) on work-integrated learning (WIL). In this section introduction, we explore work-integrated learning, detail what *TLI* readers can glean from an intentional collection of SoTL studies on WIL and provide a brief overview of the collaborative SoTL works featured in the section.

KEYWORDS

work-integrated learning, multi-institutional research

WHAT IS WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING?

Work-integrated learning (WIL) has emerged in the past few decades across a variety of international contexts in order to describe a collection of educational practices that share common elements (Ferns, Zegwaard, Pretti, and Rowe 2024, 373–75). While labels vary in different regions, WIL educational practices include internships, co-operative education, practicums, apprenticeships, clinical placements, service learning, community-engaged learning, course-based industry, and community projects. Each of type of WIL shares common elements that define quality work-integrated learning:

- three parties (student, industry/community partner, educational institution);
- authentic and meaningful work-focused experiences;
- intentional curriculum designs, enabling students to integrate theory with practice; and
- relevancy to the students' discipline and/or professional development (Zegwaard, Pretti, Rowe, and Ferns 2023, 39).

While it may be easy to identify differences in the types of WIL, such as how a clinical placement differs from an internship, there is value in considering the common elements across WIL types. Across the various types of WIL, commonly expected outcomes for students include: employability, skill development, career clarity, professional identity formation, and social capital development (Jackson and Cook 2023, 95–96).

By using a shared term to refer to different educational practices, it creates a larger body of research and a broader community of researchers and educators to develop and test theories and explore and innovate practices. There is great value in professionals being part of communities of practice that enable them to learn from one another when their discipline alone or specific type of WIL

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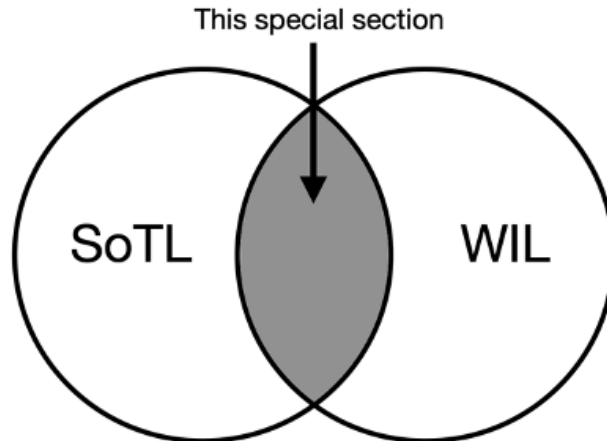
might not have brought them together. Beyond the academic community, a shared term also allows for communication and advocacy with government, community, and industry to develop and advocate for policy and funding.

However, work-integrated learning is not a well-known or well-used term in the United States, as compared with its more commonplace usage in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia; this is, in part, due to differences in government policy and funding initiatives (see Sovilla and Varty 2023 for review). Although many practitioners and researchers are deeply invested in different forms of WIL (e.g., internships, practicums, etc.), the umbrella term has not been widely adopted in the US context, and thus many US-based studies and practices are kept artificially separate due to the absence of a unifying force. Also in the North American context, WIL practitioners and those who would conduct research on teaching practices are commonly in separate university domains and often both practitioners and researchers in the US find that WIL practices are under-resourced relative to other experiential learning opportunities (NACE n.d.). Whereas, our colleagues in countries such as Canada and New Zealand have experienced high levels of government support for WIL, engaged in significant WIL scholarship, and found creative ways to integrate academics and practice (see the [Work-Learn Institute](#) at The University of Waterloo as a program example, and the *Routledge International Handbook of Work-Integrated Learning* for a sense of the scope of the international work in this area).

SoTL + WIL

When we examine the research contained within the SoTL and WIL umbrellas, we find a connection between the two, as the overlapping circles of a Venn diagram demonstrate (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Relationship of this section to both SoTL and WIL



There is WIL research that goes beyond typical SoTL research—particularly when we consider research that examines WIL through the lens of organizational theories such as the workplace dynamic of the student within a host organization. Journals like *The International Journal on Work-Integrated Learning* publish this more expansive WIL research. There is also obviously significant SoTL research focused on educational practices and theories separate from WIL, as reflected in prior volumes of *TLI* and other SoTL journals. SoTL provides a way for faculty to critically examine and explore their teaching and learning practices, including immersive and experiential pedagogies like WIL. There is great opportunity for *TLI* readers to explore an intentional grouping of SoTL studies

about WIL in the overlap of the Venn diagram. As we considered this special section focused on a number of different aspects of WIL, it was important to us to share these studies with the SoTL community who may not previously have spent much time considering WIL. We hope that this special section:

- introduces readers to student, university mentor, and workplace supervisor perspectives on this specific engaged and experiential learning pedagogy;
- offers an example of how coordinated multi-institutional SoTL projects can meaningfully deepen our understanding of specific pedagogical practices; and
- prompts more dialogue between SoTL and WIL communities.

THE CASE FOR WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

A significant body of literature shows that internships and similar WIL experiences are beneficial and valuable to each of the participating stakeholders. Much of the scholarship focuses on student outcomes. For example, studies conducted in Australia demonstrate that students develop personally, in terms of their skills and confidence, as well as professionally, through building their resumes, networks, and experience (Dewi and Velasquez 2023, 51; Henderson and Trede 2017, 77). In the United States, research has shown that academic mentors, including disciplinary faculty and career services staff, can benefit from the experience of mentoring by being able to support students and to give back to students in ways that they were supported when students, and also by the professional advancement and compensation opportunities that are afforded by working in the engaged learning sphere (Wade and Demb 2009, 9). Strong programming in WIL is valuable for universities as it can be a major draw for admissions and a way to connect to the local community (Martin 1997, 97; Wade and Demb 2009, 8). From the perspective of the host organization and site supervisors, research from Canada and New Zealand reveals that offering WIL opportunities can improve site productivity, serve as a pipeline for talent, develop organizational culture, and help supervisors develop their leadership skills (Drewery, Pretti, and Church 2020, 282; Fleming, Ferns, and Zegwaard 2023, 116; Fleming and Pretti 2019, 6).

Despite the many benefits, some academics hold concerns that WIL experiences can be detrimental to each of the key players and may even be antithetical to the mission of the liberal arts, particularly at a time when the liberal arts are under threat. The literature on WIL does show some possible risks; for example, students in placements sometimes experience physical or psychological harm, and are at risk for exploitation of unpaid labor (Isenberg 2023). These risks are often heightened for students from marginalized identity groups, such as first-generation students, students from marginalized backgrounds, or students with disabilities, many of whom already face barriers to full participation in academic and professional settings (Fleming and Hay 2021, 178–79). Universities may also face risks when students encounter harm during placements or when WIL experiences or students fall short of placement expectations (Cameron 2017, 246). They also assume administrative burdens, since the coordination of placements, supervision, and risk management require significant institutional resources and oversight (Fleming et al. 2021, 174–75). Employers also face distinct risks in hosting WIL students, including potential legal liability in the event of non-compliance with labor regulations, strain on staff time and resources, or reputational problems should a student act unprofessionally (Rowe, Mackaway, and Winchester-Seeto 2012, 122). Like any other academic opportunity, there will be some negative experiences, and it is important to mitigate risk and support students in having effective and meaningful experiences (Fleming et al. 2021, 167–79).

However, as discussed above, the research on WIL strongly points to major benefits of WIL for all involved, and WIL, when executed well, has major benefits for all stakeholders. To create WIL

experiences that serve each involved party effectively, communication and collaboration between the student and their supervisor and mentor are key, as well as between the site and university (Hora, Chen, Parrott, and Her 2020, 248). At the very least, sites and universities should be in contact, but at best these are on-going meaningful collaborations. WIL experiences tend to best support student and employer needs when both the university and the host organization prioritize WIL and have adequate onboarding and staff support (Nevison and Pretti 2016, 328–32). WIL programs also tend to succeed when student learning is at the heart and students are treated as partners (i.e., Smith and Betts 2006).

To that end, many studies on WIL outcomes focus on student employability and professional development; they show that students grow significantly in these domains when participating in WIL experiences (i.e., Jackson 2013). Beyond employability, studies also suggest that student interns are more resilient and have higher challenge orientation, adaptability, optimism, purposeful direction, and ingenuity than non-interns (Goodenough, Roberts, Biggs, Derounian, Hart, and Lynch 2017, 102). Research also showcases that interns develop personally and in their skills in self-authorship, defined as knowing and creating one’s own beliefs and identity (Caldicott, Wilson, Donnelly, and Edelman 2022, 375), as well as in their ability to work well with others and to be attuned to issues of cultural sensitivity (Eady, Abrahamson, Green, Arcellana-Panlilio, Hatfield, and Namaste 2021, 269). In fact, a significant branch of the field focuses on WIL for holistic student development rather than just employability (Caldicott et al. 2022, 376). Scholars are turning their attention to both lifelong and lifewide learning, understanding that considerable learning happens outside of the classroom and out of academic contexts entirely (Jackson 2011, 1–7), and showing student growth in personal development and meaning-making (Caldicott et al. 2022, 377).

WIL also does not stand in opposition to the liberal arts or the arts and sciences. As discussed above, WIL that is done with best practices provides a meaningful and authentic work experience for the student paired with a reflective and integrative academic component. “Internships” where the student gets coffee or files documents all day are not what we are talking about here. The National Association of Colleges and Employers, which primarily focuses on career development, has identified eight cross-cutting competencies that students should and could develop in work experiences: career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology (NACE n.d.). From our perspective, many classroom objectives align with the goals that NACE has set out for career development.

MOVING FORWARD WITH WIL

Given the trends in higher education and in the workforce, experiential education is likely here to stay. Researchers from the United Kingdom note that it is up to us to find a way to harness its power for good and to find ways to partner and integrate academic learning with practical experience (Helyer and Corkill 2015, 131–32). Two similar models that have come out recently speak to the development of the student from multiple angles, with a focus on helping our students to develop professionally, personally, and academically. In both models, the authors propose a “T-shape” of student development, with the tall bar of the T reflecting the depth of student learning, and the crossbar of the T reflecting the breadth. Maietta and Gardner’s T-shaped student model (2023) suggests that student personal and professional development is at the heart of the work, and that students develop by growing in their boundary-crossing competencies (the eight NACE competencies), and by building disciplinary knowledge and systems thinking, with student personal development as the central feature. Eady, Abrahamson, Green, Arcellana-Panlilio, Hatfield, and Namaste (2021) also suggest a T-model with a focus on whole-student development that centers student identity (268). Rather than visualizing the relationship between WIL and SoTL as a Venn

diagram as we have, they propose SoTL as the meeting point of the T and wrapped around each domain, framing SoTL research as the lens through which we can view student growth across domains.

Thus, our work is to collaboratively and collectively determine how to best prepare students for the modern world and how to integrate students' need for professional development with the values of a liberal arts education. This is not only possible but necessary, and we believe that the articles in the special issue begin to meaningfully integrate SoTL research practices into the WIL sphere and vice versa.

HOW WE CAME TOGETHER

Special section editors

CJ Eubanks Fleming is a clinical psychologist and associate professor of psychology at Elon University. As a part of her work at Elon, she has served as the faculty fellow for internships and has promoted best practice and wise practice in internships within her department and college. As a psychologist, she has participated in many forms of WIL herself and found these to be foundational and transformative experiences. CJ co-facilitated the Elon Center for Engaged Learning's research seminar on work-integrated learning.

Judene Pretti is a director within the Co-operative and Experiential Education unit at the University of Waterloo. She spent 10 years leading Co-op and WIL research as the director of the Work-Learn Institute. Her research has investigated the connection between WIL and the trends related to the future of work as well as exploring models of WIL via a systems lens. She is an associate editor for the *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* and the co-president of Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning (CEWIL) in Canada.

Gianna Smurro is a first-year law student at William & Mary Law School interested in pursuing media, communications, and First Amendment law. She graduated from Elon University in spring of 2024 with a bachelor of arts in journalism and cinema & television arts and a minor in political science. She is a 2022–2025 CEL Student Scholar with Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning researching work-integrated learning. She has participated in WIL experiences in both the United States and Italy that have shaped her perspective on the intersection of the communications field and the law and prepared her to pursue future WIL experiences through externships and legal clinics.

Annelise Weaver is a senior at Elon University pursuing her undergraduate degree in psychology, with minors in both Spanish and communications. She is a 2022–2025 CEL Student Scholar, conducting research on work-integrated learning. WIL allows Annelise to learn and gain practical experiences in her personal field of study, as well as develop personally and transition smoothly from education to employment.

Elon Center for Engaged Learning research seminars

Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning (CEL), an international research center, facilitates multi-institutional SoTL on focused engaged learning topics. Each research seminar runs for three years, with 20–24 accepted participants meeting on Elon's campus for one week each of the three consecutive summers. To date, nearly 300 scholars from over 150 different postsecondary institutions across more than a dozen countries have participated in CEL's research seminars.

During the first summer, multi-institutional (and often multidisciplinary) teams develop shared research questions under the seminar's umbrella focus. They also create research plans for their first year of data collection. All teams complete ethics or IRB review consistent with their institutional and national policies for human subjects research. During the second summer meeting,

teams begin analyzing data and adjust their research plans based on their initial year of data collection and analysis. During the third summer, teams share their research at the annual Conference on Engaged Learning and focus on additional strategies for going public with their findings.

CEL provides on-campus housing and all meals during the summer meeting weeks, as well as reimbursement for most expenses for traveling to the meetings. CEL's director also works closely with each research seminar leadership team and their participants to promote the seminar findings in presentations and publications, and CEL publishes an Elon Statement for each seminar, synthesizing findings, highlighting implications for practice, and suggesting future research areas. Learn more about the research seminars at <https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/research-seminars/>.

Research seminar teams

The work presented in this special section reflects the efforts of five teams who participated in the CEL research seminar on work-integrated learning from 2022–2024. Teams, named after trees planted on Elon University's campus, contributed work focused on each of the three stakeholders in WIL (students, mentors, and employers) in the following ways:

Team Oak: Team Oak's research focused on the questions: "what are students' perceptions of quality WIL?" and "do students' conceptions of quality WIL differ between WIL programs?" Team Oak chose to focus on identifying the essential elements of high-quality WIL experiences through students' perspectives. The study aimed to direct the attention of WIL partners to features that matter most to students participating in WIL experiences. Their paper in this section is entitled, "Six Essential Elements of High-Quality Work-Integrated Learning Experiences: A Thematic Analysis of Students' Voices." Original members of Team Oak included Monica Burney (Elon University), Nancy Carpenter (Elon University), David Drewery (University of Waterloo), and Michelle Eady (University of Wollongong).

Team Maple: Team Maple's research focused on questions such as, "how do first-generation students understand work?," "how do first-generation students narrate their identities in WIL?," and "what role does their definition of work play in the negotiation of identities in WIL?" Team Maple approached first-generation student perspectives through a life-design framework, focusing on how they define work and narrate their intersecting identities in doing so. Their paper in this section is entitled, "What Does "Work" Mean to First-Generation Students? Emerging Identities in WIL Narratives." Original members of Team Maple included Neil Baird (Bowling Green State University), Tim Diette (Hampden-Sydney College), Mariko Izumi (Columbus State University), and Christine K. Robinson (Canadian Mennonite University).

Team Magnolia: Team Magnolia's research focused on one question: "how can WIL experiences promote a sense of belongingness in healthcare professions students?" Their work explored belongingness within an environment that is crucial to student success, as well as how healthcare programs could create WIL with intentionality to meet the needs of individual students and foster successful experiences. Their paper in this section is entitled, "Exploring Belongingness during Work-Integrated Learning for Healthcare Students in International Settings: The BeWIL Study." Original members of Team Magnolia included Cindy Bennett (Elon University), Deborah O'Connor (Manchester Metropolitan University), Robin Selzer (University of Cincinnati), and Leah Stade (University of Nebraska).

Team Holly: Team Holly focused on the question, “what are the motivations and barriers associated with WIL for faculty members?” Team Holly examined the utility of a faculty engagement model in the context of WIL. The researchers piloted the model with a specific focus on faculty engagement in work-integrated learning, rather than in the broader domain of service learning which has been previously studied. Their paper in this section is entitled, “Faculty Willingness and Ability to Engage with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL): Piloting the Faculty Engagement Model in the WIL Sphere.” Original members of Team Holly included CJ Eubanks Fleming (Elon University), Kristin Geraty (North Central College), Letitia Henville (independent scholar), Denyse Lafrance Horning (Nipissing University), and Catherine Wilson (independent scholar).

Team Dogwood: Team Dogwood’s research focused on the question, “how does supervising students affect transformative leadership behaviors?” Team Dogwood provided a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of the literature on student and supervisor perceptions of effective placement supervision in work-integrated learning programs. The research strengthens our understanding of preparing all parties for effective participation in WIL placements. Their paper in this section is entitled, “Student and Supervisor Perceptions of Effective Placement Supervision in Work-Integrated Learning Programs: A Systematic Literature Review.” Original members of Team Dogwood included Borghild B. Hauglid (Kristiania University College), Anne-Marie Fannon (University of Waterloo), Rachael Hains-Wesson (University of Sydney), and Ina Alexandra Machura (Siegen University).

SUMMARY

To recap, there is tremendous and continually increasing interest in WIL globally from stakeholders that include governments, industry associations, universities, students, and parents. It is viewed as a model of education that helps students connect theory and practice, re-enforces the development of key skills, and aids students in the exploration and navigation of their professional and personal identity formation. Considered to be a high-impact practice (American Association of Colleges and Universities n.d.), internships and similar experiences have been shown to help students develop professionally, but also in terms of more general academic and personal growth.

The studies in this section demonstrate a range of topics relevant to WIL and its three primary stakeholder groups. Three of the studies examine different aspects of the WIL experience from the student perspective: from first generation students’ narratives on “work” to how students define quality WIL experiences, to how students’ sense of belonging in health professions is developed through WIL. As a learning model, WIL does not just contribute to learning outcomes for the student. There are also developmental opportunities for the students’ supervisors, as explored in one of the studies in the special issue. Lastly, the faculty stakeholder perspective is examined in order to consider the factors that lead to faculty support and engagement in WIL. Putting a SoTL lens on these studies, several themes particularly stand out; these papers explore participant perspectives in meaningful experiential education programs from multiple angles and also provide findings and implications related to program design and expected program outcomes.

Given the attention and interest in WIL as well as the wide range of research being done in the SoTL, there is great opportunity for future collaborations in several key ways. First, we hope that future work continues the trend of focusing on outcomes beyond employability, to include student personal identity development and a focus on equity and inclusion in WIL, both from the perspective of student growth in these domains, but also in terms of equitable access to WIL. Second, we hope that this issue will foster further collaboration between the three main stakeholders in WIL—students, community partners, and university mentors—especially those that consider students and supervisors

as partners in research. We believe that focusing on each stakeholder, and on including students as research partners, is critical to the future success of WIL programming. Finally, we think back to models representing the relationship between SoTL and WIL. We have visualized our work at the center of the overlap between the two, applying the principles of strong pedagogical process to our work-integrated programming, and we see significant potential value in continuing to create stronger connections between the WIL and SoTL bodies of literature and communities of researchers. We hope that this special section fosters purposeful conversation and collaboration.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

CJ Eubanks Fleming (United States) is an associate professor of psychology at Elon University. She is a clinical psychologist, has served for six years as the faculty fellow for internships, and is an enthusiastic advocate for experiential learning of all types.

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Annelise Weaver (United States) graduated from Elon University in 2025 with a degree in psychology and minors in Spanish and communications.

Gianna Smurro (United States) is a first-year law student at William & Mary Law School interested in pursuing media, communications, and First Amendment law. She graduated from Elon University in 2024 with a bachelor of arts in journalism and cinema & television arts.

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