

# Introduction

## Everything is Anecdote

This book celebrates hunches and stubborn beliefs about student engagement and integrative learning in higher education and ultimately, but not centrally, the impact of college on students. Throughout this book, readers will encounter student engagement and integrative learning as hyperlocal ways of being, actions resistant to scale, and practices that elude the capture of surveys—in short, engagement and integrative learning as anecdote. In our data-driven times, anecdote is something to be remedied with the truth of metrics. In cultures of data, it is not that anecdotes are untrue per se but that only data captures truth that can be scaled, truth that can be the basis of decision making, and truth that carries institutional and policymaking value. In celebrating anecdotal, ordinary, banal, and otherwise unremarkable classroom experiences, this book relocates the value of higher education from data to the spaces in-between metric and anecdote, completion and hunches, GPA and stubborn beliefs, and importantly for a book about impact, student engagement and integrative learning as understood in relation to high-impact practices<sup>1</sup> and daily classroom practices.

### The Problem: Our Values

This book addresses the disconnect in higher education between the values of quantification and affect, or our ways of being that resist quantification. In other words, it explores the spaces between models of high-impact practices and the squishiness of daily student life. For the last fifty years, the

value of higher education has been understood as a college's contribution to, or impact on, student outcomes variables. George Kuh's *High-Impact Educational Practices*<sup>2</sup> capitalized on this values system to name eight college practices that demonstrate the most quantifiable impact. The value of these programs at colleges across the country is now rendered through the label of high-impact practices. Simultaneously, liberal education, a concept that described the value of a college education before value was thinkable as measurable impact, has also been captured by algorithms and models. The language of the value of higher education has coalesced in the measurement of impact, forcing unquantifiable values either into its mold or casting them aside. In this time, college environments have privileged quantification and its abstraction of the human experience into the mobile data points that have come to define us.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, we have subordinated the values of college in excess of metrics to metrics.

This book presents a valuing of the student experience, whether we consider that experience to be student engagement or not, outside of components to be optimized for the production of student outcomes. Instead of turning to high-impact practices or other campus optimizations to determine what college practices have value, this book turns to the on-the-ground idiosyncrasies of daily practice as valuable in and of themselves. Instead of valuing everyday student experiences as moments to be added up to equal high-impact, this book values the everyday on its own terms as expressions of the world that makes *high-impact* possible. These anecdotes are singular practices that in the end generate impact without the algorithmic certainty of an impact calculation. Impact happens. The value of everyday impacts is not their statistical contribution to a high-impact practice; everyday student experiences are high-impact unto themselves. In revaluing impacts through these impasses, students, faculty, administrators, and practitioners also regain value in excess of their algorithmic contributions to the production of college impact.

College impact cannot continue to be the primary values system we as practitioners, administrators, policymakers, students, faculty, and the general public have for higher education. It is not that impact's associated values (e.g., retention and graduation) are valueless. It is also not the case that ordinary student experiences are always good. It is rather that we cannot continue to focus on the value of measurable college impact to the subordination and exclusion of all other values. Valuing college only insofar as its impact is measurable orients the work of campus actors toward its production and thus away from other possible values of the

college student experience that escape the measurement of outcomes.<sup>4</sup> This subordination and exclusion also creates practitioner, administrator, and faculty value in terms of production of student outcomes, foreclosing student outcomes beyond measurement and linking staff performance judgments to these metrics.

The economic crisis sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted once again the problems of the gig academy<sup>5</sup> and the valuation of quantifiable impact above most others: the most vulnerable campus actors for targeted cuts were not only disproportionately workers of color and contingent workers, but those considered to have a weak measurable impact on strategic priorities such as enrollment, retention, and graduation.<sup>6</sup> Discussion of a needed new normal in the wake of COVID-19 must not use the many faults of American higher education that preceded the pandemic to call for a new order of innovation led by data and just-in-time learning.<sup>7</sup>

Our alternate valuation of higher education does not simply point to more deserving members of a precariat or better methods for the precariat to access training needed to be slightly less but still very much precarious. It questions the very notion of a panic over enrollment numbers as the proper object of a higher education system oriented to the public good.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, the alternative valuation we seek does not rest on any single desired new normal at all: it rests on endless new normals. This is endless experimentation driven by affirmation, or a desire to increase our collective positive potential in the world.<sup>9</sup> We urgently need new languages of value in higher education. Here, we follow the path of Michel de Certeau: that is, we bring “scientific practices and languages back toward their native land, everyday life.” Across the anecdotes to come, we revalue the everyday life of learning communities.

### A Problem: Impact

This book takes what has become the common sense of college practice, the turn to data-driven (and data-validated) practices such as high-impact practices, as its central problem. When the quantification of our practices drives their value, practices that can be quantified have value. These practices come to be equated with impact, an equation dominant in the study of higher education for the past half-century and that set the stage for the possibility of a category like high-impact practices to dominate.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of impact has captured the imagination of higher education in our time of late-stage capitalism. Impact is used to sell higher education as a site of action and something colleges make.<sup>11</sup> Impact sells a college as a site of value and something a college provides to its consumers.<sup>12</sup> Impact sells a college as serious and signals a college's commitment to data.<sup>13</sup> Impact sells a college as a location of positive affects and is the production of hopes and dreams, social mobility, a better life than previous generations, and the satisfaction of being a graduate.<sup>14</sup> In practice, impact is a value-added measurement—it is the value a college adds to a student above and beyond the growth they would have experienced over the same period without attending college.<sup>15</sup> In practice, this calculation forestalls the ability of colleges to make good on the promises of impact that they sell. Colleges that value impact structure their operations to provide impact to its consumers in a measurable form. Colleges provide credits, contact hours, registration within days of application, graduation within an on-time amount of terms, a particular number of high-impact practices, a sum of contacts, touches, integration, and learning or engagement units.

The problem with impact is that the promise and potential of college is more than the sum of these parts. Participation counts in high-impact practices may on average add up to higher rates of on-time graduation,<sup>16</sup> but what does that credential reflect?<sup>17</sup> Graduates may improve on measures of social mobility,<sup>18</sup> but what does social mobility mean in the Second Gilded Age in America, where social, income, and wealth inequality are at unprecedented levels? The impact of college is somehow both present and never present enough. Its manufacture is not only necessary; also necessary is its predictive manufacture. Colleges must predict spaces of non- or negative impact before they happen and preempt their emergence, sliding even out of the calculations of impact to logics of anticipation and affects of fear.<sup>19</sup> Impact creates its own unsolvable problem, and meanwhile, larger societal values of democracy and equality are in peril. Impact is an insufficient measure for our times—but more than this, impact is an insufficient value for our times.

High-impact practices, and the conception of student engagement on which they depend, have turned student affairs practitioners in particular into interchangeable widgets in the age of the completion agenda.<sup>20</sup> Given the imperative of the completion agenda is the production of student success as graduation, the value of student affairs practitioners and other college actors is in their contribution to this metric. Academic

advisors are becoming success coaches;<sup>21</sup> orientation and first-year programs directors are becoming navigators and onboarding specialists,<sup>22</sup> and ad nauseam. Metricized value leaves practitioners, administrators, and faculty increasingly vulnerable to the rise of learning and predictive analytics in higher education. If staff and faculty positions are widgetized, they can be digitized. Under this logic, all campus actors are one optimization away from being replaced by dashboards, automated text messages, generative artificial intelligence chatbots, and the like. Without alternative conceptions of value, the worth of campus actors is their contribution to metrics, nothing more and nothing less. It is time to revalue campus life.

### Our Way Forward (Or Around and Around): Impasse

An everyday anecdotal impact focuses on all the ragged edges of college life within a high-impact practice. Anecdotes intervene against the abstraction of data—or the widget—to express its singular shapes and practices. Everyday impacts are transformative but not quite individualized, as the everyday conditions our possible individualized outcomes. The everyday creates the set of possibilities for the beings we might one day become. A conception of high-impact practices through anecdotes, the *stuff* of an impasse,<sup>23</sup> carries this significance: anecdotes are narrations of campus practices that feed and exceed the metrics that come to represent their value.

In what follows, we explore the value of classroom communities in terms of impasses rather than impact. To value the ordinary impacts that constitute a high-impact practice requires a commitment to the anecdotal that permeates every subsequent representation of such practices. Our focus here is on learning communities,<sup>24</sup> a high-impact practice whose value, once justified in other terms, has become enmeshed within the concept of high-impact practices.<sup>25</sup> Learning communities are spaces of possibility: if they indeed produce engagement and integrative learning that is high-impact, they do so in the daily grind of their production. Our work here is to step back from taken-for-granted structuring devices like *student engagement*, *integrative learning*, or *high-impact practice* to explore the everyday flows of affect that later form the student survey responses that adjudicate these structures—or not.<sup>26</sup> For Kathleen Stewart, the significance of the ordinary “lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible. The question they beg

is not what they might mean in an order of representations, or whether they are good or bad in an overarching scheme of things, but where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance.”<sup>27</sup> To approach the ordinary is to experiment with all the fragments that give learning communities their impact as a *high-impact practice*. The ordinary are the anecdotes embedded in (and escape the gaze of) data-driven high-impact practice adjudicators.<sup>28</sup> Structures like *high-impact practices*, *student engagement*, and *integrative learning* drive change through higher education with the promise of their scalability<sup>29</sup> and portability.<sup>30</sup> The ordinary presents an alternative to scale. Impact happens in a million everyday moments that tend to escape our attention, anecdotes that we otherwise attempt to make linear and scale. Christina Sharpe discusses these as the atmosphere that conditions experience, the atmosphere of anti-Blackness specifically.<sup>31</sup> This atmosphere is present here within our orientation to the atmosphere of the student experience; it too creates the weather of this book. The ordinary privileges these impasses: the times in which linearity crumbles, and progress is relegated to a holding pattern.<sup>32</sup>

For Lauren Berlant, the impasse “is a space of time lived without a narrative genre”;<sup>33</sup> impasses within learning communities are spaces of time lived without *student engagement*, *integrative learning*, or *high-impact practices* as structuring devices. More specifically, the impasse is “a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one’s sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event.”<sup>34</sup> In an impasse, we move without going anywhere, we sense but cannot make sense, and our presence in the present is such that connections to past and future constructs become opaque. The impasse denies valuation of college environments through impact, as the calculation of impact requires linear forward progress in which we make sense of the present through connecting it to past inputs and its effects on future outputs. The impasse orients us to a now where such concepts fade and, in so doing, creates space for new descriptions and modes of being to emerge. To engage in experimentation with the anecdotes of learning communities is to create their value in excess of their contributions to the measurement of high-impact practices.

## Value and Revaluing: Everything is Anecdote

The site of this book is a learning communities program at a public university in the mid-Atlantic United States. Learning communities are our site of interest for several reasons, the first of which is that they are labeled a high-impact practice, and their value on campuses is now commonly understood in relation to those terms.<sup>35</sup> This has not always been the case. Again, learning communities were once valued for something other than their contribution to metrics of engagement, retention, and graduation,<sup>36</sup> and learning communities can again be valued for something more. We can no longer only come to the value of higher education through quantification. Ordinary affects,<sup>37</sup> the ways in which we are moved as campus actors that escape the capture of quantification, are this book's mechanism for revaluing learning community classroom life. We sidestep the allure of causality as the story to be told about the value of college or, specifically here, learning communities.<sup>38</sup> We turn our attention to ordinary stories about college. We orient to the anecdotes that are in fact our contact with reality, our unobstructed experiences with learning and classrooms and growth and development and change. For Joel Fineman, the anecdote, "as the narration of the singular event, is the literary form or genre that uniquely refers to the real."<sup>39</sup> Anecdotes tell real stories. They are neither purely representational nor abstractions. Quantification abstracts ordinary life to create data-driven truth. In expressing the ordinary through anecdote, we live on the surface of truth-in-the-making.

Foci on high-impact practices (and both student engagement and integrative learning) rewrite co/curricular learning environments across higher education. This has been the case for over a decade and shows no sign of slowing, particularly in a renewed age of economic crisis and the ongoing analytics revolution in higher education.<sup>40</sup> An everyday intervention in this space, or a way of conceiving of good practices without reference to abstracted best practices, will be of interest to practitioners looking for alternative frameworks for understanding their role, as well as students and faculty in higher education and student affairs graduate preparation programs looking for a new frontier for high-impact practices. Theoretical work in education ignores this mundane space at its own peril. Higher education administrators who are pressed to develop interventions that have a quantitative impact on graduation rates, and by extension pressed into purchasing the time of consultants and the products of vendors to

produce these, will welcome an alternative way of thinking through impact and their responsibilities to students.

### The Structure of This Book

This book will take readers inside the impasses of nonresidential learning community classrooms at a public four-year university in the mid-Atlantic United States. Hereafter, this institution is referred to as State U. These impasses comprise the very anecdotes that come to be known as impact. These ordinary moments are woven together with an eye to move, or affect.<sup>41</sup> If ethnography means a manuscript generated through long-term participant observation with an eye to thick description, then this is an ethnography.<sup>42</sup> In practice, what follows is a thoughtfully messy admixture of ethnography, narrative inquiry, postqualitative inquiry, critical theory, low theory, cultural studies, and word on the street that finds its expression in anecdote.

Data comes primarily from our observations of learning communities in the Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 semesters; learning communities at State U. are almost always single-semester experiences. In Fall 2019, we observed two courses in each of four nonresidential learning communities for the duration of the semester. Of the two three-credit courses and a one-credit course that comprised each of these communities, the three-credit and the one-credit courses were observed in each community. In Fall 2020, we observed four of the five learning communities offered that term, each sharing the observed three-credit course and having their own one-credit course. The three-credit course this year was the same course and same instructor observed in two different communities in the prior year. In addition, we observed several peer mentor meetings, class field trips, class-related on-campus excursions, and learning community faculty trainings. We also conducted formal and informal interviews with learning community students, faculty, and staff and one focus group with students.

From these experiences, we re/present the mundane, ordinary moments that cohere as student engagement, the glue that produces impact,<sup>43</sup> as well as integrative learning, a value of learning communities that comes prior to their naming as a high-impact practices and also operationalized within the structuring device of high-impact practice.<sup>44</sup> These ordinary moments are expressed as a series of anecdotes from the learning communities program. Following Stewart, each anecdote “is a tangent that performs the sensation that something is happening—some-



thing that needs attending to.”<sup>45</sup> These sensations in excess of representation central to this study are affects.<sup>46</sup> In attending to affect, we renarrate engagement to the banal in order to attend to the possibilities of the everyday. These anecdotes as a collection cannot be read as totaling to student engagement, integrative learning, or a high-impact practice. And still, they do. The ordinary can coalesce “into what we think of as stories and selves. But they can also remain, or become again, dispersed, floating, recombining—regardless of what whole or what relay of rushing signs they might find themselves in for a while.”<sup>47</sup> We present these anecdotes as an engagement with the everyday. The structure of these follows our call for endless new normals. We offer these anecdotes lined up end by end, not necessarily in chronological order, in the spirit of affirmation and the impasse.<sup>48</sup> This is an and . . . and . . . and . . . approach to the value of college environments.<sup>49</sup> We present an alternative valuing of the higher education experience than those of structures that scale and multiply to optimize higher education.

Our commitment to re/present affective, ordinary impact within and integration of learning communities manifests in several additional ways. First, where we can, we do not name people or groups, and we use pseudonyms otherwise. This applies to participant names, learning community titles, and course titles. This obscures an important politics of individualized location; however, this also opens an important politics of collective and social location.<sup>50</sup> We also refer to ourselves as *she*, in following with Stewart’s example, to differentiate ourselves in our identities as researchers from subjects that arise “as a daydream of simple presence.”<sup>51</sup> As researchers, we might pursue cause and effect, meaning, structuring devices, or impact; as *she*, we attune to the possibilities of what each anecdote might bring.<sup>52</sup> Just as we are against the imperatives of cultures of evidence to abstract the value of college environments through metrics, we are against extracting ourselves from the narrative that follows. This book is not about us, but it is also not without us. Our presence as *she* in what follows is as imperfectly represented in these pages as everything else. As our individual identities blur through these re/presentational moves, the possibility within the ordinary becomes palpable. Palpable here directly refers to the state between imperceptibility and categorization; it is a felt sense that has not yet found its *narrative genre* or structuring device.<sup>53</sup> This is the work of anecdotes: not to point to what learning communities, student engagement, integrative learning, or high-impact practices might mean but rather to attend to the worldings they make possible; worldings outside of our wildest imaginations for ourselves, our students, and our

institutions; and worldings we can feel present in every moment if we can attend to them.

This book contains five chapters and an afterword. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 are anecdotes from learning communities in Fall 2019 as well as preparations from Spring and Summer 2020 for learning communities the next fall. Chapters 3 and 5 also contain anecdotes from the in-between time of Spring and Summer 2020 in addition to anecdotes from learning communities in Fall 2020. There are five types of anecdotes in each chapter. Student anecdotes and faculty, administrator, and student staff anecdotes do as they say: each type focuses on the activities of the named actors. The third type of anecdote is pedagogy. These anecdotes blur the lines between types of actors by primarily orienting to the social field at hand. The fourth type of anecdote is high-impact practice components. These components are framed by one of the eight components of a high-impact practice.<sup>54</sup> The fifth type of anecdote is explicitly theoretical. These surface both the practical comings-together of the book as well as the theoretical interventions of the other four types. We do not name anecdotes by type in the text.

We urge readers to get lost in the organization. There is no master narrative we are crafting through the ordering of anecdotes. We also urge readers to read these anecdotes as something other than a simple reprinting of our field notes. Each anecdote comes from fieldwork and is a *literary*<sup>55</sup> expression of the world of the learning community under study as mediated by us. Field notes, be they observation notes, interview transcripts, or otherwise, generally attempt to re/present the world presented to the researcher recording them. Anecdotes are not representational projects; in their commitment to the literary, they are affective interventions. Anecdotes transmit, imperfectly, the affect of the world they track. Everything is anecdote. Structuring devices help us make order of these. Where impact asks us to begin from structuring devices to engineer pasts and futures that comport,<sup>56</sup> liberal education demands attention primarily to anecdotes and subordinately to the experimentations with structuring devices they incite.

### To the Impasse

In revaluing the methodologies we use to research educational environments, we revalue the environments themselves. This book is both a

demonstration of research design and a meditation on the value of higher education. Our conceit is that each needs the other. To revalue higher education through research, we must adapt our research practices such that the expressions of alternative values become possible. This is the main register of this text. Another world is not only possible, but it also already exists. If it is valuable to highlight this re/valued higher education in research, our research practices must be capacious enough to attune to it.

It follows that if this revalued higher education is worth pursuing, then the reach of work like this must extend beyond traditional readers of research methodology texts. Readers who come to this text primarily through interest in the practicalities of revaluing higher education in excess of measurements of impact should feel free to dive deep into the anecdotes. Bounce around in and out of page order with abandon. Microdose the few interspersed theoretical anecdotes as you desire. Allow what you read here to alter your orientation to what matters in your daily practice. Come back to read this on a methodological register when it speaks to you; it will be here waiting.

We were not interested in writing a book about theoretical alternatives to impact that shied away from practice. We were also not interested in writing a book about practical alternatives to impact that shied away from theory. Most of what follows are practical anecdotes from classroom life. These perform the theory of the book. Some of what follows are theoretical readings of practice. Our task was to attend to everything that moved us, in all directions moved. These affects come from the stories, and they also come in between the lines; in the connections made; in the lingering questions unresolved on the page; and in the feelings of urgency, crisis, monotony, boredom, and everything in between. Our need to revalue higher education is urgent. What follows is a deep dive into the irreducibly qualitative<sup>57</sup> value of higher education.