When I attend the Lilly teaching conference as I did this year, it is typically the highlight of my academic year. I’ve been fortunate to attend many times. There is no one reason that makes Lilly stand out, but rather a combination of factors makes it a special event. First, as you’d expect for the grandma of teaching related conferences, the session presentations and keynote speakers are a source of new information and inspiration. The conference program is packed with sessions from early morning until right before the afternoon reception and dinner hour, and sometimes after dinner. You can run yourself to a frazzle if you are in session intoxication mode. In recent years, I’ve opted for a few breathers along the way to have time to reflect on what I’m hearing or to talk to others about it.

Second, the conference gives me a chance to remember why I came to Belmont a quarter of a century ago — teaching. As a graduate student, I was on one career trajectory until I started teaching introductory psychology as a third-year student. Slow on the uptake, I spent another year coming to understand that issues of teaching and learning brought me the most joy in my academic life. Luckily, I had a major professor who understood the value of teaching and teaching-focused colleges, even though his primary duties centered on the scholarship of discovery. I changed my career path, and, long story short, Belmont and I found each other. As Belmont’s academic identity evolves, Lilly reminds me of the many exceptional faculty and institutions where teaching is central. It is an important reminder.

Third, I don’t always present at Lilly, but when I do, I like to do it with Belmont colleagues. This year, I learned a lot and had a ball while presenting two sessions: one with Mike Pinter on effective course conclusions and the other with Joyce Crowell and Steve Simpler on the ways in which students try to manage professor behavior and how professors can or should respond. Part of the spirit of Lilly presentations is to leave room for discussion during the sessions. It’s during these discussions that you understand the dedication and thoughtfulness of those who attend Lilly from universities around the globe.

Finally, and on some level, most importantly, the Lilly conference offers four days of making connections with Belmont faculty. Some of these faculty, such as Mike, Joyce, and Steve, are long-time, good friends, and Lilly gives us a chance to make sure these bonds remain strong. But then I also get to know faculty I’ve never met before or faculty with whom I’ve had only brief conversations. It’s hard to underestimate the value of these friendships that develop over meals, between sessions, or in the van ride to and from the conference. This year, for example, I met a group of younger faculty who keep me optimistic about the teaching culture at Belmont.

This conference always reminds me that whether we are teaching mathematics, literature, chemistry, or art, fundamental issues bind us together as teaching faculty. Every time I attend, Lilly highlights these connections and commonalities, and I come back a better teacher because of it.
I’ve attended maybe half a dozen Lilly conferences, and every time I find at least one thing that I bring back. I don’t always know at the time which of my experiences will stick with me. Sometimes it’s a classroom exercise; sometimes it’s a grading technique; sometimes it’s an idea to make my Faculty Activity Report better.

Oddly enough, this year, it was a new attitude toward Student Learning Outcomes. I heard a presentation that explored the audiences for SLOs and that considered which audience might be the most important. Near the end of the question and answer period, a well-known assessment “guru” stood up to make a speech (really more like an impassioned plea or a sermon), and the combination of the presentation and the response has me thinking differently about SLO’s. I even said as much to my department recently. The key idea is this one: if our students understand what they’ve learned by earning a degree (and sometimes the Student Learning Outcomes give them language which helps their understanding), they are likely to advocate for higher education in whatever venue they find themselves later. This idea is so very important in my field of Computer Science where training, certification and self-education is pervasive. Our graduates need to understand what they take with them beyond their diplomas.

Our own faculty’s contributions to Lilly conferences stimulate creative thinking on this campus. I recently attended a Teaching Center Luncheon by Pete Giordano and Mike Pinter about ending a course well—a presentation they made at the Oxford, Ohio Lilly Conference a few weeks later. As a result, I changed the way I ended one of my courses this semester with satisfying results. We are so very lucky on this campus to have local access to great ideas about teaching. Nevertheless, I recommend that our faculty travel to Lilly conferences to keep the ideas on this campus flowing.

One last reason to travel to a Lilly conference is to travel with colleagues. I have gotten to know faculty with whom I would not have crossed paths on campus and made connections I treasure.

Attending the Lilly Conference was an enjoyable and rewarding experience for me. I had opportunities to interact with Belmont colleagues during travel to and from the conference and during the many social occasions the conference itself permits. I got to know my peers better and had some wonderful conversations with them about teaching. During the conference it was great to be around people from schools all across the United States, and even other countries, and from various departments. I knew we all had one important thing in common: we love teaching, and we keep striving to become better teachers. I attended several interesting sessions that made me reflect on my own teaching, and I have already implemented many of the great ideas and advice from the speakers; I have used tips shared by those attending the sessions. I also returned from the conference feeling inspired and even more enthusiastic about teaching than before. I plan on attending the conference next year as well, and I would encourage all my colleagues to do the same!
“SoTL? What are they talking about? Does this even apply to me?” I remember thinking that not too long ago. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, or SoTL (pronounced ‘so-tuhl’), as it’s commonly called, was largely a mystery. At the Lilly Conference, I started really trying to understand SoTL and how it could apply to me as a chemistry faculty member.

At one Lilly session I was introduced to another acronym—DBER (pronounced ‘dee-ber’). Discipline-Based Educational Research is an area of SoTL that combines teaching and learning knowledge with discipline-specific science content. It aims to develop research-based instructional strategies to overcome difficulties learners face specifically in the sciences. The National Science Foundation (NSF) produced a consensus report on the state of educational research in the sciences and the current resources and strategies available to educators. As I listened to the speaker discuss highlights from the report, I started thinking, “Wow, this stuff makes a lot of sense. I think I can do this.” This session and others helped me realize that Teaching and Learning research works the same as my disciplinary research (and follows the same scientific method I know and love):

- Develop a hypothesis
- Design an experiment
- Collect Data
- Analyze the Data
- Report the Findings

Wait...report the findings? My colleagues and I do educational research all the time—we identify something that’s not working or something we want to change, we try new things, and we decide what direction to move in the classroom based on the results. Reporting the findings though? Not so much. In chemistry, we have a premier journal dedicated to the publication of “what works” and other kinds of educational research aptly named the *Journal of Chemical Education*. The NSF was able to produce an extensive report, and even (especially?) in chemistry, the field was found to be sadly lacking in research-based educational practices. Something as basic as the effectiveness of student lab activities has very little hard science (pardon the pun) behind it, and this deficiency needs to change.

At Belmont we pride ourselves on being a leading teaching university. Most of us likely do SoTL informally all the time. I know I do. After Lilly, however, I am challenging myself to be more intentional about my SoTL work, and, most importantly, to get the word out. To be a leader in teaching and learning, we need to move in this direction—sharing our research-based, best practices so others can follow in our footsteps.

The loudest message at the 2013 Lilly Conference may have been, “Higher education is being destroyed, it’s our fault, and there’s no turning back.” This idea, thankfully, was not the most consistent or meaningful message. In reflecting on the conference, my biggest takeaway was the impact of “collaboration.” A number of the sessions I attended addressed not only student collaboration, but faculty collaboration as well. The ability to work in teams, it seems, is not just something employers desire in our graduates; it is also something we, as faculty, should want to do.

An excellent example of the positive impact of faculty collaboration comes from one of the most interesting sessions I attended, “Opportunities and Challenges of Team Teaching Across Disciplines in the Arts” by Miami University’s Julia Guichard, John Weigand, Peg Faimon, and Harvey Thurmer. The session centered on the possibilities and difficulties encountered by the four faculty members as they worked to create a series of “thematically sequenced” courses in the arts, set within a study-abroad experience in Paris. These faculty members from Theater, Architecture, Art, and Music, spent two years working together to design a course intended to expose non-art majors to these arts disciplines, and to have the students work collaboratively on creative projects before, during, and after their time in Paris. Learning about the students’ experiences in the class was interesting, but the most compelling element was learning about faculty experiences as they worked together to create the course.

In my experience, the opportunity to spend time with fellow teachers—talking about our teaching and learning about each other’s experiences—has by far had the most impact on what I do as a teacher. As I listened to the four faculty members talk about working together, their conversation helped validate my own experience. In fact, the most beneficial part of attending the Lilly Conference likely came not from the conference itself, but rather from the time I spent with colleagues on the way to and from the conference, at meals, and during breaks. In these moments, we were able to talk about teaching, to share what we do as teachers at Belmont, and to ponder how we planned to apply what we were learning to our courses at Belmont. This organic, casual collaboration was inspiring, energizing, and rewarding, and much like the conference as a whole, left me with a renewed enthusiasm for what we do as teachers, together as teachers, to impact the lives of our students at Belmont.
Teaching Center and General Education May Workshops
Tuesday, May 6 and Wednesday, May 7
Massey Boardroom

May 6
9:00-noon General Education Workshops (FYS and Senior Capstone)

1:00-4:00 Teaching Center Workshop
Beyond Best Practices: The Scholarship of Teaching & Learning 2.0, Part 1

May 7
9:00-noon General Education Workshop (LCC and JCS)

1:00-4:00 Teaching Center Workshop
Beyond Best Practices: The Scholarship of Teaching & Learning 2.0, Part 2

Teaching Center Workshop Leader: Nancy Chick, Assistant Director of Vanderbilt Center for Learning, and Co-Editor of Teaching and Learning Inquiry

This two-part workshop will introduce participants to both fundamentals and higher-order issues in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Part 1 will feature opportunities to practice the varied approaches, designs, and methods of SoTL. Part 2 will delve more deeply into specific issues in SoTL, including the roles of qualitative research, models of collaboration, markers of quality, and paths to presentation and publication.

Teaching Center August Workshop
Monday August 11 and Tuesday August 12
Frist Lecture Hall, 4th Floor Inman
(This is a one-day workshop offered two times.)

Workshop Leader: Ken Bain
Author of What the Best College Teachers Do and What the Best College Students Do