

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

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# Achieving Teaching and Learning Excellence through Faculty Learning Communities

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A faculty learning community (FLC) is a cross-disciplinary faculty group of 5 or more members (8 to 12 is the recommended size) engaging in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, interdisciplinarity, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and community. A faculty participant in an FLC selects a focus course to try out innovations, assess resulting student learning, and prepare a course mini-portfolio; engages in biweekly seminars; works with student associates; and presents project results to the campus and national conferences. Evidence shows that FLCs increase faculty interest in teaching and learning and provide safety and support for them to investigate, attempt, assess, and adopt new (to them) methods (Cox, 2001).

### **FLCs: Two Basic Categories**

There are two categories of FLCs: cohort-based and topic-based. Cohort-based FLCs address the teaching, learning, and developmental needs of an important cohort of faculty that has been particularly affected by the isolation, fragmentation, stress, neglect, or chilly climate in the academy. The curriculum of such a community is shaped by the participants to include a broad range of teaching

and learning areas and topics of interest to them. These communities will make a positive impact on the culture of the institution over the years if given multi-year support. Four examples of cohort-based communities at Miami University are the Teaching Scholars Community for junior faculty, the Senior Faculty Community for Teaching Excellence, the Preparing Future Faculty Community for graduate students, and the Department Chairs Learning Community.

Topic-based learning communities have curricula designed to address a special campus teaching and learning need, issue, or opportunity. These communities offer membership to and provide opportunities for learning across all faculty ranks and cohorts, but with a focus on a particular theme. A particular topic-based FLC ends when the campus-wide teaching opportunity or issue of concern has been satisfactorily addressed. Examples of topics addressed by topic-based FLCs are team teaching, problem-based learning, diversity, teaching portfolio development, ethics, departmental assessment of general education, small-group learning, teaching writing-intensive courses, first-year experience, connecting the humanities and digital technology, and courses in common.

### **Comparison with Other Types of Faculty Groups**

FLCs are more structured and intensive than other types of faculty groups such as teaching circles and "brown bag" study groups. FLCs are different from, but in many ways like, action learning sets in that they both are "a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done" (McGill & Beaty, 2001, p. 11). FLCs employ the Kolb experiential learning cycle, engage complex problems, energize and empower participants, have the potential of transforming institutions into learning organizations, and are holistic in approach.

### **Recommendations**

We recommend the following practices for ensuring that FLCs are effective. An institution's culture and key players affect the manner in which these suggestions should be employed. Detailed recommendations for initiating and continuing FLCs can be found in Cox (1997, 1999).

**Initial Planning Overview** The campus teaching center and/or faculty development office should develop one or two FLCs at a time. Often administrators are willing to invest funds in junior faculty, technology, or diversity, so these may be good starting points. Faculty and administrators must be convinced that an FLC provides meaningful learning, development, and community. To provide convincing evidence, campuses that already have student learning communities can cite evidence that the outcomes for faculty are similar: increased collaboration across disciplines; increased retention; a more coherent curriculum; more active learning; more civic contributions to the common good; and, over time, a campus community built around teaching and learning. View the initial year as pilot testing.

*Initial Planning Items.* Engage the following steps at the start:

- Obtain broad administrative and faculty support, including academic vice president and deans, a critical mass of department chairs, respected senior and junior faculty (control stays here); and university senate.
- Establish a respected advisory committee, part of university governance.
- Emphasize outcomes about increased faculty and student learning, interest in teaching and learning, etc.
- Cite the literature to build support.
- Select your "best" faculty to establish the initial FLC as prestigious, not remedial.
- Give the faculty participants a strong hand in designing the year's agenda.
- Design activities, accommodations, and recognitions to make participants feel valued and respected by the institution.

*Scholarship of Teaching.* Nurture the scholarship of teaching by incorporating a sequence of developmental events: for example, starting the year with discussion based on the focus book; developing individual teaching projects with clearly stated learning objectives, literature reviews, and assessment plans for student learning; and providing access to relevant books and journals on post-secondary teaching and learning. Members should present the results of their projects at a campus-wide seminar or teaching retreat, followed by a

presentation at a national teaching conference (Cox, in press).

*Assessment.* Provide a means for assessing the effectiveness of the objectives of the community, both short- and long-term. Use evaluation surveys to gauge faculty development outcomes and the effectiveness of program components. Collect pre- and post-community syllabi to illustrate changes inspired by participation. Participants should prepare a course mini-portfolio for their focus course.

*The Role of Faculty Leaders.* Teaching center faculty and staff play a key role in managing the operations of FLCs. This consists of working closely with each faculty coordinator of a community. The office handles room scheduling, meals, travel, publicity, and budget items for all the communities. Providing a variety of FLCs over the years enables faculty to concentrate on specific issues or developmental needs at various times during their careers. FLCs provide deep learning rather than surface learning.

*Compensation and Rewards.* Participation in an FLC takes time and work: attendance at retreats, national conferences, and biweekly seminars; interaction with a student associate and a faculty partner; reading the literature of the scholarship of teaching; development of a teaching project; and preparation of a presentation for the campus and, perhaps, a national conference. The best compensation for faculty participants is to provide release time from one course for one semester. If an institution does not have the budget to provide release time, each participant could receive an honorarium of \$500-\$1,500 to use for professional expenses. Each faculty community coordinator receives one-course release time for both semesters. Service as a coordinator or participant must be approved by his or her department chair.

*Overcoming Obstacles.* Some obstacles must be addressed in order to start and continue FLCs. One obstacle is the length of time needed for an institution to show a cultural change as a result of the community approach—at least 5 years. Other obstacles include cost, participants' time commitment, changes in administration, and the isolated nature of faculty life—the group structure of the community experience is not for everyone. With this in mind, institutions

initiating communities should continue other support for individuals: grants, one-to-one consultations, and "one-time-only" campus seminars and workshops. These obstacles are similar to some of those that challenge student learning communities, as Barr (1998) observed: "Faculty experimenting with [student] learning communities are finding themselves hard-pressed to keep them going" (p. 22).

## **Conclusion**

Once one successful FLC is up and running, however, the positive outcomes for participants and the institution should convince administrators to continue and expand funding. Enthusiastic participants can convince reticent colleagues to join. The long-term rewards of community, collaboration, and better student learning are well worth the effort. Faculty learning communities and their inherent opportunities for change and growth provide the support for meaningful impact on individuals and the institution.

Note: Institutions interested in developing FLCs are invited to visit <http://www.muohio.edu/flc/> and join the Consortium.

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