Folks:

The posting below looks at how to create a "faculty community of critical practitioners who teach in a reflective and intentional manner that leads to better student learning." It is by Michael Reder, director, Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, Connecticut College. The article is from the Fall 2007 issue of Peer Review, Vol. 9, No. 4. Peer Review is a publication of the Association of American Colleges and Universities [www.aacu.org/peerview] Copyright © 2007, all rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Regards,

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College and Universities’ focus on liberal learning outcomes, civic learning, diversity, global education, residential learning, general education, and critical thinking echo this current trend of concentrating on student learning.

The shortcoming of too many of these discussions focused on student learning, however, is that faculty -- and the role that faculty play -- is often an afterthought. While the integration of the diverse aspects of a student's educational experience can only be a good thing, we cannot lose sight of the fact that at most of our institutions, learning is "classroom-centered": the majority of student learning either takes place in or is directed through classroom activities. In order to effect any kind of widespread change in student learning, we need to offer specific pedagogical support to faculty who will play an essential role in that change.

>From Faculty Teaching to Student Learning

Over the past ten years there has been a fundamental shift away from teaching (which views knowledge as central, something that is objective and simply passed on from teacher to student) to learning (and the idea that knowledge is something that is constructed and relational, a process in which the learner is central). It is a mistake, however, to think that this shift in focus away from what is being taught to who is learning de-emphasizes the importance of the teacher. If anything, the role of the teacher is even more demanding and complex, as she is forced to negotiate not only a body of knowledge, but also an ever-changing and diverse group of learners. As Robert Barr and John Tagg note, this new learning paradigm views faculty as designers of learning environments who work in consort with learners (and other support mechanisms on campus) to "develop every student's competencies and talents." They argue that, far from the traditional notion that "any expert can teach," "empowering learning is challenging and complex" (1995). In other words, although the learner may be at the center, the teacher's role is more varied and demanding.

This relatively new role provides an excellent opportunity for faculty to become learners themselves. As Trudy Banta asserts in a recent issue of *Peer Review*, "Most current faculty are not trained as teachers, so extensive faculty development is needed to raise awareness of good practice in enhancing teaching" (2007). The programs that I and my colleagues at other faculty teaching centers coordinate ask faculty to connect across disciplines and ranks in order to think critically about something they all share in common: teaching. Our work provides faculty with the opportunity to overcome what Lee Shulman, the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, terms "pedagogical solitude." Faculty from different departments, some on the opposite ends of our campus, many with differing levels of teaching experience, work together and learn from each other. By providing occasions during which faculty may talk about their teaching, we create the opportunities for them to learn: from each other, from the literature about teaching and learning, from reflective practice.

>From Student Learning to Faculty Learning

Many at liberal arts colleges are quickly becoming aware of the reality that favorable conditions for good teaching are not the same as truly supporting teaching in a visible and intentional manner. This new emphasis on effective teaching explains the tremendous growth over the past five years in faculty development programs at such institutions (Mooney and Reder 2008). One strong indicator of this trend is the significant increase in small-college membership and participation in the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network, the professional organization for faculty and administrators running faculty development programs and centers for teaching and learning. Once mostly the domain of large research universities, centers for teaching are also being established at small "teaching" colleges all over the country, as such schools have realized that teaching deserves attention, and that for professionals to do something well, they need to practice their craft publicly and critically.
There are several widespread misconceptions about the work of faculty teaching programs, and I would like to address three that I encounter most often when working with faculty and administrators:

Misconception One -- Programs for faculty teaching and learning are about remediation. In reality, programs that focus on faculty teaching are about intentionality and critical practice. People who do things well are constantly reflecting upon what they do, gathering information, and making it better. Our programming allows faculty to become more intentional, and therefore more effective, teachers. At Connecticut College, for example, the faculty regularly involved in the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) programming are not only exceptional teachers, they are also well-known scholars and campus leaders. Our most engaged faculty -- in terms of research, teaching, and service -- participate in and help lead our programming. Especially at a small liberal arts college, there is a symbiotic relationship between effective teaching and scholarship (see Misconception Three).

Misconception Two -- Programs for faculty teaching and learning advocate one right way to teach. How one teaches is shaped not only by a person's individual identity (race, gender, age, sexuality, experience), but also the nature of the discipline, the difficulty of the material, the size of the course, and the experiences of the learners. Successful faculty teaching and learning programs must embrace a diversity of teaching styles in order to accurately reflect both the variety of disciplinary approaches and the individual personalities of faculty. Our work acknowledges this diversity of approaches; such diversity is essential because exposure to a range of options is required to allow faculty to make informed choices about their teaching practices. The discussions that the CTL fosters are almost always interdisciplinary, where scientists might learn from studio artists, or economists from humanists. Additionally, when we focus on the question of who is doing the learning, the diversity of the learners themselves becomes central to the educational enterprise. Thus, programs for faculty teaching address not only diversity related to teaching and content, but also diversity related to our students -- in terms of their abilities, experiences, learning preferences, as well as race, gender, and class.

Misconception Three -- Programs for faculty teaching and learning force faculty to make a choice between being scholars and being teachers. Teaching well and disciplinary scholarship require the same habits of mind: teaching and learning programs ask faculty to become learners themselves, in a way that is similar to their engaging in their research or creative work. As teachers we are asked to learn about our own teaching, about student learning itself, about designing learning activities, and about improving instruction and curricula. Like our research, which is reflected upon, made public, and therefore improved, our teaching should undergo the same processes. At many kinds of colleges, faculty are asked to be both teachers and scholars, and the lines between faculty teaching and research are often blurred, particularly when we involve our students in our own research. Above all, teaching needs to be conceived as a collaborative practice (something done within a larger community that is open to discussion) and a critical practice (something shared with an eye toward discovery, integration, refinement, and improvement), just as faculty do with their disciplinary scholarship.

Teaching and Learning: What Really Makes a Difference

Recent research suggests that there are specific classroom practices that lead to improved student learning. The preliminary results of parts of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education create direct links between faculty teaching methods and achieving the goals of a liberal arts education. The results indicate that faculty interest in student development (both inside and outside of the classroom), a high level of challenge, and the overall quality of teaching are just a few of the conditions that correlate positively with student growth in areas such as motivation, openness to diversity and change, critical thinking and moral reasoning, attitudes toward literacy, and the desire to contribute to the arts and sciences. Having clear goals, requiring drafts of papers, incorporating class presentations, offering prompt feedback, and utilizing higher-order assignments (writing essays, solving problems not presented in the course, and making
and analyzing arguments), all contribute to student growth in areas that many schools identify as overall educational goals. Although these teaching characteristics may seem obvious, Charles Blaich, the director of Wabash’s Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts, notes that preliminary results show great room for improvement in our classrooms: "... a majority of the students at our institutions are not getting ‘high enough’ levels of these teaching practices and conditions, which may explain why students, on average, do not seem to grow much in the first year on the outcomes we measured." Just as most colleges support faculty undertaking their own scholarship, it is equally important for schools to support faculty in their quests to become as effective teachers as possible.

Supporting Faculty as Teachers and Learners

Efforts focused on improving teaching can be coordinated using a variety of models, the most common of which include a faculty development committee, a dean’s office, a rotating faculty coordinator, or a center model with a director. At many colleges, faculty learn about teaching in a variety of often-decentralized locations: first-year experience programs, community learning projects, information fluency initiatives, the writing program, instructional technology, and departmental discussions. Beyond helping to shape and connect faculty to these many initiatives and opportunities, an effective teaching and learning program will offer at least two types of programming: a yearlong experience designed specifically to meet the needs of incoming faculty with the primary goal of helping them make the successful transition to teaching at the institution, and some form of ongoing programming open to faculty of all ranks.

Supporting Incoming Faculty

Doctoral education emphasizes research, not teaching, and as the vast majority of faculty are trained at research universities, the need for faculty teaching development is particularly salient at small liberal arts colleges, where the teaching ethos and classroom practices contrast considerably. The excellent literature on early-career faculty (Rice, Sorcinelli, Austin 2000; Moody 1997; Boice 1992, 2000) clearly defines the challenges new faculty face across institutional types. However, faculty at small liberal arts colleges confront a variety of distinctive challenges that the literature does not directly address, including the small cohorts of incoming faculty and the relatively small size of departments and the faculty as a whole. In addition, diversity has been slow coming to many small liberal arts colleges, and new faculty, often hired to diversify the curriculum or the composition of the faculty in terms of race or gender, can be challenged to find like peers. Thus, early-career faculty might feel an isolation that their counterparts at larger institutions do not experience, not only in terms of their own research and disciplinary interests, but also in terms of pedagogical approaches, methodological training, and lifestyle.

There are additional issues that can impact early-career faculty at small colleges in ways different from their colleagues at larger institutions, such as the distinctive missions of many small colleges (including those with a religious affiliation) and their locations, which are often away from larger metropolitan areas (meaning that dual-career couples may need to commute to find employment, and faculty who are single may want to commute in from a larger community). Connecting incoming faculty to other early-career faculty across the institution provides them with a network of colleagues who have experience negotiating similar issues. Connecticut College, which uses a peer mentoring model to connect first-year faculty to each other and across cohorts to second- and third-year faculty (Reder and Gallagher 2007), and Otterbein College, which employs a single-cohort learning community (Fayne and Orquist-Ahrens 2006), are two schools that have successful yearlong programs that are designed to address the issue that small-college faculty face.

Continuing Support for Faculty: Creating a Community of Learners

In addition to orienting new faculty, it is essential to support faculty at all stages of their careers. Although there are many types of programming for faculty beyond their first year, the programs
that often have the most impact are ones in which faculty engage in a yearlong exploration of some aspect of teaching and learning, or programs that offer a series of standalone events that faculty can attend according to their interests and needs. Many of these discussions focus on curricular objectives to liberal arts values and goals, such as critical thinking or teaching writing or oral communication skills. Programs such as Colorado College's "Thinking Inside and Outside the Block Box" series (www.coloradocollege.edu/learningcommons/tlc/programs_luncheons.asp) and Connecticut College's "Talking Teaching" series (ctl.connoll.edu/programs.html#talking) offer faculty the opportunity to discuss specific teaching issues with colleagues in an informal setting. Other successful yearlong programs include Allegheny College's Teaching Partners (Holmgren 2005), Macalester College's midcareer faculty seminar (www.macalester.edu/cst/Mid%20Career%20Seminar), St. Lawrence University's Oral Communication Institute (Mooney, Fordham, and Lehr 2005), and St. Olaf College's CILA Associates Program (Peters, Schodt, and Walczak 2008).

Colleges that support faculty in the development of their teaching skills recognize the difference between "caring about teaching" and "critically practicing teaching." They are working to create a faculty community of critical practitioners who teach in a reflective and intentional manner that leads to better student learning. And this community, composed of colleagues from across the disciplines right on campus, creates the opportunity for faculty to become lifelong learners.

References


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