



This Teaching Tip is one of a five-part series from a Faculty Learning Community at Pennsylvania State University.

Getting Better Every Day: Developing a Faculty Learning Community as a Space for Enhancing Teaching and Learning

Sharing and discussing teaching and learning openly among colleagues is a precious opportunity to grow and develop our work to better promote student learning. The opportunity to hear from colleagues is one of the things we appreciate about the NACTA organization and its annual meeting. We were looking for a way to build a similar sense of community and collaboration around andragogy in the agricultural sciences on our campus. This Teaching Tip outlines the process we followed to develop a robust and productive Faculty Learning Community in our College of Agricultural Sciences.

Funding

We (Melanie and Noel) had often discussed topics of teaching and learning and thought there should be a broader conversation among our colleagues. The impetus to take action on that idea came from an internal funding opportunity to create a Faculty Learning Community at our university through our Teaching and Learning with Technology unit. We applied and were awarded a small amount of funding with the understanding that our Faculty Learning Community would meet on a regular basis, have a group consisting of at least four faculty and share outcomes through a report and a presentation. This funding was renewed for a second year and we were able to obtain funding from our undergraduate education office, both of which were key in cementing the community we started to build in the first year.

Recruitment

Members were recruited to join using a few different methods. Our college developed a press release that was distributed to faculty across the university, which allowed us to pick up a few members outside of our college working on related topics. We also used

word of mouth to ask colleagues that we knew would like to discuss how to improve their teaching and learning practices. After the kick-off meeting we created an email listserv to facilitate easy communication with members. When we developed a core group of members, we stopped advertising broadly and new members are welcomed into the community through word of mouth.

Programming

We took a grassroots approach with monthly meetings discussing a topic determined by the members of the Faculty Learning Community. While other Faculty Learning Communities on our campus read a book together or brought guest speakers to campus, we spent much of the first year learning about all the teaching and learning resources on our campus. We invited speakers from around campus to give short talks about the services their unit provides, making sure there was plenty of time for discussion among members on how we could utilize those services. At some meetings members share their teaching and learning success or failure, giving others the chance to discuss, ask questions and make suggestions based on their experiences. Through these experiences we quickly learned that what was needed was a space for discussion, rather than just a one-way conveyance of information. This has been the driving principle around our group, and what has actually allowed us to build a strong community among members.

Incentive

If we just spend our time discussing among members, what could we possibly need funding for? The answer is that we've used it to create a very unique accountability structure -- buying people lunch. Think of it - we've all been in the situation where the meeting reminder pops up and we think, "I'm so busy, I can't possibly get away to go to that meeting. They won't notice that I'm not there." In our Faculty Learning Community we've worked to create a very gentle structure that encourages members to attend. In fact, we've never had a member miss a meeting. How? First, every meeting is held over the lunch hour. Second, lunch is provided. We have an RSVP process where faculty put in their specific lunch order. That way they know that there will be a made-to-order sandwich, burrito or other lunch item with their name on it (sometimes quite literally). While it might seem trivial to talk about how we take lunch orders, discussing teaching and learning while breaking bread together has been key in encouraging participation and building a community where members are eager to share and learn together.

What we've learned is that in our busy roles we often lack the opportunity to simply discuss what is working well or not well in our teaching. This Faculty Learning Community

has created a shared space to simply discuss challenges and ways to improve the learning of our students among colleagues we have grown to trust.

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