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Foreword: The Changing Landscape of Faculty Development at Small Colleges

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I graduated from a historic liberal arts college for women, Mount Holyoke College, a place where I sought intellectual challenge and found the power of my voice. In 1975, inspired, like so many of Mount Holyoke's students, by the famous words of its founder, Mary Lyons, "Go where no one else will go, do what no one else will do," I moved from that small, inclusive learning community to a large, public research university to pursue a doctorate. I would remain in large public research universities in the Midwest and New England until returning to the College in 2015 to work to advance faculty development, leadership, and women's education. Despite establishing my career in a very different institutional type, I have always sustained deep connections to the College, serving as class scribe for the alumnae quarterly and as a volunteer for fundraising efforts. As well, all three of my children graduated from small liberal arts colleges, including a daughter from Mount Holyoke, and I have long supported effective teaching at small colleges through the Professional and Organizational Network in Higher Education (POD).

When I returned to Mount Holyoke, one of my first goals was to learn more about the current purposes, structures, and practices of teaching and learning centers in small colleges. To do so, I conducted a website-based content analysis of some 20 teaching and learning centers at leading liberal arts colleges. I also reviewed data collected in two comprehensive studies of the field of faculty development that I co-led. The initial study was published in 2006 (Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, Beach, 2006). A second study is wrapping up and scheduled for publication in 2015. Both included robust representation from those involved in teaching and learning at small colleges.

In what follows, I would like to highlight a few of the interesting find-

ings about liberal arts college faculty development. My hope is that this evidence-based snapshot further supports the goal of this special issue: to build and expand upon current theories and practices of small college teaching and learning.

Structures

Faculty development structures in small colleges have evolved quite dramatically over the last decade. In both our studies, we asked the senior developer in the college, usually a center director or associate dean of faculty, what best described the structure of faculty development efforts at their institution. In liberal arts colleges, we found that an individual faculty member or administrator charged with supporting faculty development had virtually doubled from one third in 2001 to almost two thirds in 2012. Those colleges having a campus-wide unit with dedicated staff grew from approximately a quarter to almost a third. What notably diminished were committees that coordinate faculty development activities—from over a quarter in 2001 to not even a tenth in 2012. The result is a striking increase in the last decade of formalized faculty development in small colleges, through either a college-wide center or an administrator or faculty member championing support for teaching and learning.

This is not to say that the centralized structures in small colleges look like teaching centers in large research universities. In fact, structures in large universities look more alike than those in small colleges. I would describe small college centers and programs as much more context-sensitive. For example, based on my review of center websites, the spheres in which small college centers place the most emphasis vary from student academic success, to teaching development, to broader faculty development (some even have words like “research,” or “scholarship” in their name, and a few include support for sponsored research). They also are often organized with more direct links to student development supports and services such as speaking, writing, and quantitative reasoning, community-based learning, undergraduate research, and first-year seminars.

The staffing of liberal arts college faculty development is equally eclectic. While the number of college-wide centers continues to expand, the use of faculty members to help colleagues clearly remains a structural part of faculty development at liberal arts colleges. Staffing is often “hybrid” in the sense that faculty members who are appointed as “directors” also continue to teach part-time, and often serve three- to five-year terms and then rotate out of the directorship. As a colleague remarked to me, “instructional development is the instructional faculty.” The positives of

this arrangement are that there are always faculty-driven agendas, fresh ideas, and new energy brought to programming and activities. At the same time, rotating or part-time leadership can cause a lack of continuity of focus and provide very little dedicated time for building and sustaining programs and initiatives.

Goals

In both of our studies, we asked directors what goals or purposes guided their programs and what three goals were their foremost.

The results of our 2012 survey suggest that liberal arts colleges are guided by more goals, and those goals are more faculty-centered when compared to all other institutional types. For example, the highest-ranked goal across all institutional types was that of “creating or sustaining a culture of teaching excellence.” It was a primary goal for three quarters of all respondents, including developers in liberal arts colleges. “Responding to and supporting individual faculty members’ goals for professional development” was a primary goal for almost a third of all respondents, but for almost a half of developers in liberal arts colleges. Finally, “fostering collegiality within and among faculty members and/or departments” was a primary goal for one fifth of all respondents, but for almost one third of developers in liberal arts colleges. These findings suggest the centrality of the traditional emphasis on teaching excellence at small colleges, and the recognition of the value of a committed and responsive faculty. They also reflect the emphasis on academic community as a core cultural value of liberal arts colleges.

Services Offered

We wondered what key issues were currently being addressed by faculty development programs and centers. In our 2012 survey, we queried directors with a list of 38 issues and asked them to indicate the extent to which their program or center was currently offering services pertaining to those issues.

Despite their small size, we found that faculty development programs at liberal arts colleges were offering more services to a moderate or great extent than centers at any other institutional type. Liberal arts developers identified six urgent issues that their programs were addressing with services: integrating technology into traditional teaching and learning settings; active, inquiry-based, or problem-based learning; new faculty development; assessment of student learning outcomes; course and curricular reform; and mentoring programs.

Additionally, another six issues were being addressed at a slight to moderate extent: blended learning approaches, community service learning, writing across the curriculum/writing to learn, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), creating course/teaching portfolios, and program assessment (for example, for accreditation). The articles in this special issue will serve to illuminate how faculty developers at small colleges manage to address so many critical issues through their services and will share their best practices and lessons learned in doing so.

Taken together, the results of reviews of websites and surveys of directors of teaching centers at liberal arts colleges suggest that small colleges indeed have to do “more with less.” And yet they are at the forefront of innovative teaching and learning and of creating visible linkages between student success and faculty success. Perhaps better than anyone else, they provide support across the career stages and disciplines, are guided by faculty interests and needs, embrace peer, interdisciplinary, and inclusive learning, and address what is distinctive about teaching and working in a liberal arts college. These are among the many reasons why I am so committed to supporting their work.

I consider it an extraordinary privilege to work at a small liberal arts college. My appointment at Mount Holyoke College has offered me a remarkable opportunity to take a new path in my professional life, returning full circle to the College that transformed my life. In many ways, I have returned to what attracted me to faculty development in the first place: the chance to work alongside faculty and administrators who care deeply about students, teaching, and faculty professional development. I am honored to be part of what makes small colleges such distinctive places—their dedication to excellence in teaching and learning. Indeed, their dedication to excellence in everything they do.

Reference

- Sorcinelli, M. D., Austin, A. E., Eddy, P. L., & Beach, A. L. (2006). *Creating the future of faculty development: Learning from the past, understanding the present*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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