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## **Supporting Teaching and Learning at Small Colleges— Past, Present, & Future: A Message From the Guest Editor**

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### **The Past**

Small colleges and universities have long made special claims to their commitment to engaged teaching. While undergraduate teaching and learning is central to the mission of these types of institutions, it is only in the past 15 years that they have begun to create, on a wide scale, coordinated and comprehensive programs to support faculty members in their quests to become effective teachers.

Such programming helps make the good teaching and learning occurring on those campuses not only more visible, but also more critically informed and deliberate. Small colleges and universities that make claims to take teaching seriously but do not support faculty openly and intentionally, with formal programs that they can point to, are quickly becoming a thing of the past.

The growth in formalized support for faculty teaching at small institutions is indisputable. Since the late 1990s, the membership of the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education that identifies itself as being from small institutions has multiplied from several dozen to several hundred. POD has, since 2002, hosted a formal session for small college faculty developers; since 2005, POD's Institute for New Faculty Developers (INFD) has had specialized sessions for faculty and administrators doing this type of work on smaller campuses. The Small College Committee currently boasts over 350 people on its official listserv, SC-POD. As Mary Deane Sorcinelli shows in her Foreword to this issue, the number of small colleges with formal positions and programs has grown incredibly over the past decade—creating

structures designed to support the claims we have long made about the teaching and learning that occurs on our campuses.

### **The Present**

Along with the growth of formalized small college faculty teaching and learning programs, there is a growing body of literature and research that attempts to codify, expand, and explore the theory and practice of supporting teaching and learning at these distinctive types of smaller institutions. As the bibliography at the end of this issue attests, over the past decade there has been a profusion of work devoted to improving the programming to support faculty at smaller colleges.

From the current literature, we know that the support of “effective teaching and learning” at such institutions is both similar to and different from that being offered at other types of colleges and universities.<sup>1</sup> There are distinct advantages and disadvantages to doing this work within a small setting: Some have to do with scale, others with resources; some have to do with institutional commitments and priorities, many of which support a faculty member’s commitment to teaching and learning, and some of which may pose a challenge to that commitment (Mooney & Reder, 2008; Reder, 2007, 2010). As the literature attests, there are distinctive strategies to support faculty in their pursuits to become as effective teachers as possible. Yet the literature focusing specifically on small college teaching and learning is still in its infancy, and one purpose of this special issue is to move the scholarship further along, into its adolescence, as might be the case—to build upon and expand the ideas that are only just maturing.

### **The Future**

I see three areas that are critical to the future of teaching and learning work on small college campuses:

- Evidence-Informed Practice: Current Research on Teaching & Learning and Using Assessment Evidence
- Full Participation: Diversity & Inclusivity
- Leadership: Leading Change & Developing Leaders

While these three issues impact teaching and learning programs at most higher education institutions regardless of their type, they will play out, I believe, in distinctive ways for the faculty and administrators supporting faculty development on smaller campuses.

*Evidence-Informed Practice:  
Current Research on Teaching & Learning  
and Using Assessment Evidence*

There has been a tremendous amount of clear, focused research on effective approaches to teaching and how students best learn. Evidence-informed books include Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovell, and Norman's *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* and Persellin and Daniels's *A Concise Guide to Improving Student Learning: Six Evidence-Based Principles and How to Apply Them*. Nilson's *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors* is currently in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, and both McKeachie's *Teaching Tips* (in its 14<sup>th</sup> edition) and Zull's *The Art of Changing the Brain* remain touchstones for many of us working with faculty. These works all provide faculty with evidence-based ways to refine their classroom practices as they improve their courses and curriculum.

How we design and shape learning experiences for our students significantly impacts their learning. The Wabash National Study (<http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-research/>) has clearly linked student experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom, to growth in many of the typical goals of an undergraduate education—critical thinking, moral reasoning, attitudes about diversity, engaged and responsible leadership, and the desire to contribute to society as a whole (Center for Inquiry, 2015). It is and will continue to be our responsibility to bring faculty and administrators into dialogue with this research in order to foster critically informed, intentional practitioners who use evidence to design assignments, courses, and curricula.

Along with the growth of reliable research about student learning and significant student experiences, colleges and universities themselves generate a great deal of local information about their own students and their experiences, from sources as diverse as faculty assessment of student work to a campus's results on large national surveys. There has been an increasing demand for accountability—pressure from the outside—to assess the student learning that is taking place on our campuses. But beyond accountability, if colleges and universities do not use the assessment information they gather about their students, they are missing an incredible opportunity to improve faculty teaching—and student learning.

Institutions that regularly survey students using such instruments as the CIRP Freshman Survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), or the College Senior Survey too-rarely actually *use* the information they garner to engage faculty members in conversations

about what they can learn from such “local” evidence. Small colleges usually have more bare-bones administrative structures than their larger counterparts—many lack offices of assessment or even an institutional researcher—which means that faculty members often are responsible for assessment and institutional effectiveness as part of their service. Those of us who are working with faculty to improve their teaching and student learning are well-situated to help our colleagues understand and utilize this local evidence—helping them to teach more effectively and to design both the curriculum and their courses to most improve student learning.

The Wabash Study has revealed that the differences in student experiences and growth in learning *within* institutions is greater than the mean differences in student experiences and growth *between* the different institutions (Blaich & Wise, 2011). In other words, on our campuses there are students who experience the best of what our schools have to offer, and those who experience too little of the good things we do—and, therefore, don’t learn as much as they could in the process. It is our responsibility to help our colleges design and enact educational experiences that mitigate those disparities in student experiences and learning.

*Full Participation:  
Diversity & Inclusivity*

Higher education is more diverse than it ever has been, a diversity especially visible in our curricula, our faculties, and our students. Small colleges that in the past may have been even less diverse than their larger counterparts are experiencing a proportionally stronger impact from this trend. Centers for teaching and learning need to play a major role to help ensure that all faculty members and students thrive on our campuses. Two current ideas can help frame our work: Inclusive Excellence and Full Participation. Almost two decades ago, researchers established the value of a diverse student body (see Hurtado, Dey, Gurin, & Gurin, 2003; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; and Milem & Hakuta, 2000). More recently, the Wabash National Study has show that “interactional diversity”—the extent to which students engage with diverse peers, ideas, and sociopolitical and religious perspectives—has a “significant positive impact” on students’ intellectual growth (Pascarella & Blaich, 2013, p. 11). Research related to the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) has even revealed that students at liberal arts colleges report more diversity-related experiences than their counterparts at other institutional types—again showing their relationship to increased growth in educational outcomes (Umbach & Kuh, 2006). While diversity has clear educational benefits, it can also pose

challenges both to institutions and to individual faculty members as they struggle to keep up with changing expectations, values, and priorities.

### **Inclusive Excellence**

Inclusive Excellence is concerned with the values of diversity, inclusion, and equity. The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) describes the principle of “making excellence inclusive” as the “active process through which colleges and universities achieve excellence in learning, teaching, student development, institutional functioning, and engagement in local and global communities.” A large part of this process is focused on student learning. We must never forget that good teaching benefits all students—not only those who are lesser-prepared, those with learning differences, and those from first-generation backgrounds, but also our traditional students. Effective teaching is a key to inclusivity and student success, which is another reason why our work needs to continue to emphasize intentional, evidence-informed approaches to teaching and learning. We also need to support our colleagues’ ability to have “difficult conversations” in their classrooms—to engage our students (and each other) in productive discussions about diversity, inequality, identity, power, and privilege. Few of our colleagues outside of the social sciences have been well prepared to engage with these issues in a classroom—or on our campuses in general.

### **Full Participation**

Beyond ensuring that our teaching is as inclusive and effective as possible, as faculty developers we also have a role in supporting the success of our colleagues and shaping the overall environment on our campuses. The concept of “Full Participation” provides a framework that embraces students, faculty, and all campus community members, and is “focused on creating institutions that enable people, whatever their identity, background, or institutional position, to thrive, realize their capabilities, engage meaningfully in institutional life, and contribute to the flourishing of others” (Sturm, 2006, 2010; Sturm, Eatman, Saltmarsh, & Bush, 2011). Such a framework can help guide our work as we expand from faculty development to organizational development, from a more narrow focus on improving faculty teaching and student learning to a broader emphasis on helping our institutions themselves learn and change. As higher education evolves, it needs to aspire toward the goal of full participation. Our potential role in helping shape the culture of our campuses—both within our classrooms and beyond—cannot be overstated.

*Leadership:  
Leading Change and Developing Leaders*

Our overall role as campus leaders has been a topic of recent publications and professional conversations (see, for instance, Schroeder, 2010). The work of “organizational development” is a natural extension of our work, especially when it is framed as helping our campuses grow and change. On a small college campus—where faculty developers know most if not all of the faculty members, administrators, and staff—our potential influence upon institutional change is profound.

According to Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, and Beach (2006), Educational Development has experienced five “ages” or periods: the Age of the Scholar; the Age of the Teacher; the Age of the Developer; the Age of the Learner; and, since the new millennium, the Age of the Network. All of these ages are cumulative, in that the following age does not replace the previous age, but rather incorporates and builds upon it. A decade and a half into the new millennium, I would argue that we are on the threshold of a new age, the “Age of Leadership”—a role that will be particularly relevant on small college campuses. Because faculty colleagues often hold many of the key administrative leadership positions on small campuses (think rotating department chairs, program directors, deans), our work is essential both in helping lead new initiatives (such as curriculum revision) and in preparing our institution’s future leaders. The many professional conversations currently taking place about programs geared toward supporting mid-career faculty reflect our roles not only in supporting faculty teaching and careers, but also in helping to prepare our colleagues for the essential roles they will play at our institutions as leaders.

Clearly, educational developers have leadership roles to play on our campuses. Our growing role in evidence-informed practice, full participation, and leadership will require us to grow, adapt, and change the ways in which we frame and structure our support for teaching and learning on our campuses. Over the coming decades, we, as educational developers and as leaders, must and will continue to learn and grow.

### **This Special Issue**

The articles in this issue have been carefully selected because they address these key issues that small colleges—and, to a great extent, all institutions—face. These articles build upon current theory and practices in new and productive ways, and ask us to push our work as educational developers to new levels or to think about our roles differently.



**Janine L. Bowen** and **Janet Hinson Shope's** "Difficult Conversations We're NOT Having: Mixed Group Perspective-Taking and Diversity Education at a Small College" presents an innovative and effective way to engage our campus communities in important discussions about inclusivity, identity, power, and privilege. Their approach engages members of the entire campus, making the topic of diversity one that extends beyond the classroom into people's lived institutional experiences—a process that works especially well on a smaller campus but can have an equally significant impact in larger contexts. In my own work, I have recently come to understand not only how much I have to learn from students, but also how much I have to learn from the staff on our campus and their insights into student experiences. Engaging faculty in new ways allows them to take different perspectives on not only student learning but also their own teaching.

Similarly, **Diane Boyd's** "The Growth Mindset Approach: A Threshold Concept in Course Design Workshops" engages faculty with the research on the plasticity of learning, asking them to think differently about student learning. Her workshops smartly combine "growth mindset" and threshold theory to move faculty in new directions in their course design and approach to teaching. Such an approach gives faculty members "permission" to rethink their teaching and course design—and actually adopt many of the approaches to effective teaching in much of the recent literature.

**Laurie Grupp** examines the "complexity and reach" of the roles we play on our campuses in "Faculty Developer as Change Agent: A Conceptual Model for Small Institutions and Beyond." Those of us working to improve teaching and learning on small college campuses are often given the opportunity to engage in work beyond simply improving faculty teaching practices—allowing us to help lead large initiatives and shape the cultures of our institutions. The model Grupp presents offers us insight into our roles as organizational developers and provides helpful take-aways for those of us engaging in such work. Grupp's article provides a framework that helps us understand ways in which we engage in organizational change and development.

In "Facilitating Mentoring Across Three Models of Faculty Work: Mentoring Within a Community of Practice for Faculty Development," **Patricia E. Calderwood** and **Suzanna Klaf** analyze the ways in which a center for teaching and learning engages in cultural change—specifically, by facilitating faculty mentoring across an institution. They argue that a "community of practice" framework offers a "potentially powerful approach that our small, faculty-centric center[s] could further develop in

the service of contributing to a rich, university-wide culture for mentoring” (pp. 84-85). The authors examine the different ways in which faculty conceive of their work and the varied ways in which they view mentoring. Such insights allow centers for teaching and learning to adjust their programming to be more effective—improving not only teaching practices, but also the ways in which our campuses nurture faculty throughout their careers.

Finally, **Chico Zimmerman** and **Carol Rutz’s** “The Care and Maintenance of Faculty Culture: A Small College Curricular Approach” also addresses the idea of changing the culture of an institution. At Carleton College, a basic “curriculum” for faculty helps shape the multiple opportunities faculty have to work on their teaching; this curriculum is reiterated and reinforced across varying events throughout the year. Although decentralized, these workshops and discussions are closely coordinated, and they have produced a “rich culture” of faculty development that is located not only within their teaching center, but also within various campus-wide initiatives, such as writing and quantitative literacy. The result is “a faculty culture dedicated to collegial conversations and mutual instruction that helps foster a shared sense of purpose and contributes to an overall institutional focus on student learning” (p. 93). As the authors themselves note, in terms of a culture of valuing teaching and learning, to what more could any institution, small or large, aspire?

### Footnote

<sup>1</sup>I have never much liked the term “faculty development”; I know few faculty members who like to be “developed,” and the term feels as if it is something that is *done* to people. The term “educational development” is growing in popularity, especially in an international context, and speaks to our work that extends beyond working with faculty members. Given my druthers, I would probably call what most of us do “faculty learning,” and I would run a “Center for Faculty Learning.” However, in keeping with the effective practice of using terms that resonate with the people doing the learning, in my experience, most of my colleagues think of themselves as teachers and scholars—hence, my use of the term “teaching” to describe what they do.

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