

Chapter 13

Developing Scholarly Teaching at a Research University: Using Learning Communities to Build Capacity for Change

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this chapter, the authors explore how faculty learning communities that focus on teaching and student learning have been instrumental in transforming the perception of teaching as a “tax to be paid” into an engaging scholarly activity. Faculty engagement in learning communities devoted to teaching and learning facilitates the development of new knowledge and insights into teaching and student learning as well as new perceptions regarding the roles of teaching in the faculty’s professional career. Using a case study approach, the authors describe various examples of learning communities at the University of Maryland that have transformed perceptions about teaching.

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BACKGROUND

The hallmark of research universities is the generation of new discipline knowledge through faculty research. Many faculty perceive this as the primary component of their work and as the unit for which they are recognized and rewarded (Boyer, 1990; Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997). Many faculty therefore perceive teaching as a tax paid to enable the important work of research, which they believe is the basis for recognition, rewards and promotion. As a consequence, faculty efforts and engagement in teaching and student learning are often compromised. While most faculty approach their teaching with a professional attitude and strive to do well, too often their work as teachers lacks the scholarly orientation present in their discipline research efforts. In other words, they approach teaching not as scholars but as journeymen who disseminate information to students using traditional pedagogies that he or she experienced as a student. Contributing to the journeyman approach is the lack of basic training in how to teach during graduate school. Rather than receiving any formal training, new graduate students adopt an apprenticeship approach and when they move into faculty roles they teach as they were taught. This reiterative cycle fails to account for advances in our understanding of how people learn, new pedagogical approaches, and new technologies integral to the contemporary world. Moreover, most faculty have little or no awareness, much less knowledge of, the significant body of literature within their own or related disciplines that provides grounding and insights into how students learn or what constitutes effective teaching. Yet, we have observed award winning teachers. Some develop scholarly expertise in teaching through luck, trial and error, and/or persistence. For others, a scholarly interest in teaching evolves from participation in a faculty learning community.

The concept of learning communities in higher education dates back to the early 20th century and is rooted in the seminal work of John Dewey (1916). Much of the early work was on student learning communities focused on structured programs for undergraduates that connected student life with the academic curriculum in order to foster engaged life-long-learners (Shapiro & Laufgraben, 1999; Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). Looking at the faculty experience, O'Meara, Terosky and Newman proposed that "higher education is centered on learning, and learning should be at the center of how faculty grow throughout their careers" and, importantly for this discussion, "faculty learn, grow, and make professional contributions through professional relationships embedded in communities" (O'Meara, Terosky, & Neumann, 2009, p. 171). Numerous professional societies ("POD Network" | Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education) (the American Society for Microbiology "Biology Scholars Program") and others, plus institutions such as

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