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The Value of a Teaching and Learning Center

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One of the most pressing issues in higher education is that of student learning – how to improve, measure, and ensure it. Parents, government officials, and business leaders are demanding that colleges and universities educate their students better, and many institutions have responded by establishing teaching and learning centers. These centers have emphasized the centrality of student learning and have offered support to faculty to become the most effective teachers possible. During the last decade, there has been tremendous growth in centers across the globe: the best private and public research universities have created them, and new centers are burgeoning in comprehensive universities, small liberal arts colleges, and community colleges. The teaching and learning center is a concept whose time has arrived (Cook and Sorcinelli, 2002).

In the spring of 2009, I was invited to the American University in Cairo's Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT) as a visiting scholar. As both a faculty member and academic leader with over twenty-five years of experience in faculty development in the United States and around the world, I had founded two centers at major American research universities and paid visits to countless others. My experience at Egypt's first university teaching center was exceptional. I discovered that CLT is a "jewel in the crown," of the campus, Egypt, and the region. Moreover, the CLT offers innovative best practices to which teaching centers in Australia, Canada, Europe, and the U.S. can look for inspiration.

The value of a learning and teaching center has been well documented (Cook and Sorcinelli, 2002; Eble & McKeachie, 1985). An effective teaching center addresses the needs and interests of the entire academic community in support of the education of students; advances "leading-edge" issues in teaching, learning, and faculty development; highlights and disseminates instructional innovations; fosters collegial dialogue within and across disciplines and career stages; builds an ethos of feedback and assessment that is viewed as supportive, not evaluative; informs professional preparation and practice based on scholarship; and is key to creating a campus culture that values and rewards teaching.

The CLT has distinguished itself as an excellent example of what we hope for and expect of all centers. It very intentionally welcomes all faculty; generously shares state-of-the art teaching strategies with colleagues in and across departments; and facilitates conversations about, and explorations of, teaching and learning campus-wide. Its professional staff offers a comprehensive program of services to reach faculty with varied interests and needs. These include individual consultations and midterm student feedback; seminars and workshops on teaching methods and issues; and linkages with other units such as the library, academic computing, and classroom technologies and media services to stimulate teaching improvements.

But what I believe sets CLT apart from many centers is its forward-looking focus on the most urgent challenges in improving student learning: the need to engage in learner-centered teaching; to integrate technology inside and outside of the classroom, and to emphasize assessment of student learning outcomes. These issues were identified in a major study of the field of faculty development in higher education as three of the top challenges confronting faculty members and *the most important* issues to address through faculty development services and activities (Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, & Beach, 2006).

Emphasizing Learner-Centered Teaching

For many faculty members who are accustomed to lecturing while students listen, learner-centered teaching may require new and unfamiliar teaching skills and may raise fears about lack of coverage of content or less control over assessment activities. Learner-centered teaching, however, allows students to do more learning tasks, such as summarizing discussions, and encourages them to learn more from and with each other. Teachers, on the other hand, can do more of the design work and provide more frequent feedback to students. CLT regularly convenes successful teachers to share a large repertoire of active learning strategies upon which their colleagues can draw. This is accomplished through CLT's annual faculty development fall and spring institutes and its on-going workshops on topics such as student-led discussions, team learning, peer learning, oral presentations, writing-to-learn activities, case studies, and study groups. Its biweekly newsletter, "New Chalk Talk," and website also offer both basic and cutting-edge information on learner-centered teaching strategies.

Integrating Technology into Teaching and Learning

Integrating technology into traditional teaching and learning calls upon faculty to use new methods to help students acquire content knowledge, develop problem-solving skills, participate in learning communities, and use digital information sources. When considering technology in teaching and learning, one immediate issue faculty members face is what tools—PowerPoint, email, the internet, course management systems—might best serve their student-learning goals. But the successful integration of technology is more complex, entailing the careful consideration of course content, the capabilities of various technology tools, student access to and comfort with technology, and the instructor's view of his or her role in the teaching and learning process. CLT is cutting-edge in its focus on the kinds of support and training required to thoughtfully integrate technology into the classroom. It has been particularly creative in its piloting of emerging learning technologies that actively engage students, such as clickers, blogs, wiki's, and podcasting. It has created a successful student technology assistance program, provided training to help instructors improve their pedagogy in smart classrooms, and supported the development of technology-enhanced instructional materials and course redesign activities.

Emphasizing Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

Assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves deciding what students should be learning, making expectations explicit, systematically gathering and analyzing student assignments to determine what students actually are learning, and using the resulting evidence to make pedagogical improvements. There are a number of teaching resources that can help faculty members develop a better understanding of the learning process in their own classrooms and assess the impact of their teaching. Since its inception, CLT has featured classroom assessment techniques (e.g., the minute paper) and advice on how to adapt and administer these techniques, analyze the data, and implement improvements in teaching and learning practices. CLT also has been on the forefront of the creative use of formative assessment activities including offering mid-semester feedback on instruction via Clickers and WebCT as well as through focus groups or papers.

Conclusion

As we enter the 21st century, researchers and practitioners have identified key areas that are driving change and shaping the future of faculty development. Central is the impact of a changing paradigm for teaching and learning—learner-centered teaching, learning technologies, and course-based assessment. Centers for teaching and learning are a key strategic lever for responding to change, assisting faculty in their efforts to grow, and enhancing institutional quality. Congratulations to CLT for encouraging faculty to create the future of teaching and learning.

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