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Hard Times Signal Challenges for Faculty Developers

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As fiscal crises and cutbacks hit higher education, instructional/faculty developers need a broad array of methods for sustaining programs. Based on a forum at the 1991 POD Conference, this article identifies specific innovations and strategies that instructional/faculty developers are using to cope with and, in some cases, enrich faculty development programs during these difficult fiscal times.

Recent reports on higher education conclude that budget cuts are imposing the hardest times state colleges and universities have experienced since the Depression. The recession is taking its toll, and nearly everywhere in academe the outlook is described as bleak (Cage, 1992; Jacobson, 1991). For example, more than half of our states made mid-year budget reductions in 1991, and we can expect more in 1992. Even at private colleges, there are signs that the growth years of the '80s are over as student enrollments (and tuition money) drop by as much as 20 percent.

Ironically, despite shrinking resources, faculty development centers are increasingly called upon to cure long-term problems in undergraduate education—through the training of teaching assistants, multicultural and diversity education, teaching evaluation for both improvement and personnel decisions, efforts to elevate the status of teaching, the development of new faculty and chairs, and the revitalization of mid-career and senior faculty. Put simply, many of us find requests for services burgeoning while resources diminish.

How can undergraduate teaching and our teaching development centers best weather the hard times ahead? Which goals, activities and programs are most important for us to protect and nurture? In what creative ways can we continue to do at least as much with fewer resources? Can we view the faculty development glass as half full rather than half empty? Is there a positive spin to the increased demands on our centers? If so, in what ways can we sustain and indeed encourage the professional growth of our faculty and ourselves during changing times? These important questions beg to be explored.

Articulation of the Problems

At the 1991 POD Conference, we offered a structured forum for developers to articulate common problems and to share inspirational, pragmatic, and politically-aware strategies. The primary goal of this session was to provide time and space for faculty developers to talk about ways to cope with the demands on and cuts in higher education, particularly in their own programs. Participants included faculty, instructional, and organizational developers from both public and private colleges and universities.

The session was designed to tap the collective wisdom of colleagues who were already grappling with funding problems on their own campuses. We began with a brief overview of some of the key challenges and demands facing our own centers and faculty development programs in general. Based on the issues evoked, we asked participants to spend about ten minutes jotting down responses to the following: What is one of your top priorities in your faculty development program? How has it been affected by budget cuts? What have you done to cope with or turn that problem around?

Participants then worked in small groups to share both problems and innovative ideas and strategies to resolve funding dilemmas. Finally, a spokesperson from each group reported to the large group. We also distributed handouts with a series of concrete ideas for enriching faculty development in difficult fiscal times.

Creative Solutions

Participants quickly identified a top priority of their respective faculty development programs and indicated how it had been affected by budget cuts. As might be expected, more established programs appeared better able to withstand cutbacks than new ones. The denouement of a two-year effort to get a university in the Pacific Northwest to put some time and money into instructional development presented a typical discouraging scenario. In this case, the president and provost resigned at about the same time the state

announced a budget cut. In the face of administrative and budgetary uncertainty, the aspiring faculty developer was left wondering how he could argue for support.

On a brighter note, other faculty developers were finding innovative solutions to budget problems. Under duress in hard times, they were summoning the flexibility and creativity required to protect key programs. For some developers, it was a matter of being willing to try an innovative idea or unorthodox approach to accomplish one's faculty development goals. For others, the use of tried-and-true strategies in an innovative way was the best response to fiscal austerity. Still other developers found it necessary to determine priorities in order to preserve some programs and let go of others.

Although it is difficult to make generalizations based on the experiences of individual campuses, we discovered that the coping strategies offered by practitioners sorted into five broad categories: 1) involving faculty in program initiatives; 2) seeking administrative leadership; 3) encouraging collegiality; 4) creating systems of "outside" support; and 5) providing rewards and recognition.

It should be noted that the notions embodied in this framework are not uniquely applicable to "bad times." These general strategies, we believe, are appropriate keys to success and survival in all times. In fact, our sense is that those who employ them in "good" times will be those who best weather the bad; those who merely resort to these strategies at the eleventh hour may be those whose programs are most negatively impacted. It is with this caveat that we offer some ideas for pulling through hard times in faculty development.

Involving Faculty in Program Initiatives

Studies of faculty development programs point to the importance of faculty involvement and ownership (Eble & McKeachie, 1985; Nelson & Siegel, 1980). Hard times seem to further encourage faculty developers to seek ways to foster faculty participation. For example, a large midwestern university imposed ten percent budget cuts on all units just as the professional and organizational development director was scheduled to begin a sabbatical leave. He and his staff decided to ask several faculty members to coordinate specific activities for the office (e.g., a senior professor coordinated the pre-tenure support group; a department head coordinated seminars and workshops for chairpersons). Selected faculty were named "Associates" to the office and received a modest $500.00 in professional development monies.

The notion that hard times can promote more faculty involvement is

reinforced by the experiences of a faculty developer at a community college in New Jersey. A reduced budget prevented her from inviting outside consultants to lead workshops. As an alternative, the developer organized a "Faculty Day" that was designed and run by "in house" faculty. The morning portion of the program consisted of a series of twenty-minute mini-lectures by instructors who were trying new strategies in their classrooms. After a low-cost pizza lunch, a panel discussion chaired by faculty and administrators explored issues of common interest with the audience (e.g., dealing with a range of advising needs, with disruptive students). The faculty developer reported, "The faculty loved it . . . I'm still getting letters!"

Seeking Administrative Leadership

Although faculty involvement is crucial, so, too, is an administration that takes an active role in creating a positive environment for teaching (Eble & McKeachie, 1985; Nelson & Siegel, 1980; Sorcinelli, 1988). During hard times it is essential to communicate with academic administrators, not only to indicate the importance of professional development to the morale and sense of well-being of faculty members, but also to seek advice on teaching-related needs and concerns.

One director of a brand new faculty development center has begun her appointment with an explicit commitment to communicate with both faculty and administrators. Upon arrival, she launched an effort to meet with every faculty member, department chair, and dean on campus (some 140 individuals). Her goal was not only to heighten awareness of her center but also to seek faculty and administrators' advice on needs and solutions to problems.

Hard times may also encourage key administrators to seek the expertise and assistance of faculty development programs. For example, even though developers at a large southern university normally emphasize instructional support over evaluation, they are responding to a charge from faculty, deans, and the provost to lend their expertise to an initiative to improve the system for evaluating teaching for both improvement and personnel decisions. The provost has followed through on his promise to provide funding for planning and implementing the revisions. For this top administrator, it is clear that the challenging task of assessing and rewarding good teaching has become important enough to commit scarce monies. In funding this initiative, he made evident his overall support for faculty growth and change: "We must be careful in the hardest times that we do not stagnate. We have to make difficult choices about priorities, yes, but there are some things we must go forward with."

Encouraging Collegiality

A number of faculty development studies confirm that faculty members need support from one another, and many express the desire to talk with colleagues within and outside of their departments and disciplines (Boice, 1991; Sorcinelli, 1985). In hard times, it seems even more important to bring colleagues together in ways that will result in new ideas and increased enthusiasm for teaching.

Approaches to faculty development that involve faculty in examining some aspect of the teaching and learning process and then sharing insights and experiences can be both low-cost and impervious to budget cuts. For example, one faculty development center for which classroom research projects were a top priority suffered a fifty percent cut in faculty development lines. The developers were determined, however, and ultimately they pieced together support to protect their mini-grant program for classroom researchers. The project was saved because it had become a primary vehicle for providing faculty with opportunities to discuss their efforts to improve teaching and learning. Other faculty development programs report similar benefits from projects that focus on classroom research and related approaches, such as use of teaching cases and peer teaching consultation (Fideler, 1991).

Collegiality also made the difference for a midwestern faculty developer who, at no additional cost, reconfigured the orientation for new faculty so that it had a higher impact, meaning that it was more interesting, stimulating and interactive. Instead of a "parade" of speakers, the program included opportunities for building relationships among new and established faculty, as well as for more efficiently providing information about teaching, research, and campus resources (e.g., assigning each new faculty member to a senior colleague for the day, organizing round table discussions with key campus resource people).

Another developer, the sole professional appointment in her office, had just secured modest funding to begin designating one senior faculty member each year as "Senior Faculty Associate" to the center. This individual, a distinguished teacher and scholar, will assist the developer on mutually agreed upon projects. For example, the senior faculty associate might work with junior faculty members. He/she could offer a workshop, visit a class, review a manuscript, or simply share insights on teaching, learning, scholarship, or campus culture. Additionally, by working together, the developer and senior faculty associate will effect new patterns of collegiality within the center.

Creating Systems of "Outside" Support

Even before the recent cuts to higher education, many faculty development programs struggled with limited staff and funding (Sorcinelli, 1988). Hard times can further encourage the strategy of joining forces with others rather than working alone to accomplish program objectives. For several developers, creating systems of support with other campus groups and agencies, and even with other campuses, provided valuable stimulation, insights, and funding.

One successful strategy is to seek collaboration—on ideas, staff, resources, funds—with other campus agencies. For example, having already cut travel and grant money two times, the Center For Teaching Excellence at a Delaware institution remained determined to serve the largest number of faculty possible through a weekly workshop schedule, a newsletter, a videotaping service, and an orientation for teaching assistants. By requesting and securing partial funding from other offices (e.g., graduate school, international programs), the Center actually managed to expand the TA orientation to a second day.

Although transferring precious funds from one's faculty development center to other units seems unorthodox, the following example illustrates how such a move can have a positive outcome. Faced with the possibility of cuts to a faculty grants-for-teaching program, a faculty developer at a Canadian university decided to transfer the funds to division heads. Not surprisingly, deans and division heads became advocates for continuing the new model of "grants to departments." The developer also experimented with a strategy of "exporting" threatened functions to secure divisions. In this case, funds for workshops on teaching were vulnerable. Fortuitously, undergraduate student leaders approached the developer for assistance in proposing a conference on teaching. Cuts were averted when the administration endorsed the student initiative and the use of faculty development funds for this pivotal cooperative alliance.

Creating connections beyond one's campus is another successful strategy. For example, developers at two institutions were able to capitalize on the recent heightened interest in the quality of undergraduate education among state and regional officials (e.g., legislators, regents, boards of trustees). One developer positioned his office as "a resource for expertise and for policy and program development within our state system." This action was beginning to gain him visibility for and participation in his program. Similarly, a three-year old campus-wide Quality of Teaching Committee at a Canadian university was poised to hire an instructional development officer or to establish an office for faculty development, but funds were lacking.

Coincidentally, a major national report on Canadian universities was released, which lamented the lack of focus on teaching, promoted a broader definition of scholarship, and recommended the establishment of quality indicators. Wisely, the Quality of Teaching Committee plans to use this "window of opportunity" to bolster their proposal to initiate a faculty development program, and to link with the national agenda for improving college teaching.

Providing Rewards and Recognition

During hard times it is difficult for institutions to provide rewards, especially monetary rewards, for the achievements of faculty members. Yet several studies of faculty careers suggest that recognition by colleagues and administrators of a faculty member's contributions enhances satisfaction and counteracts academic stress (Sorcinelli, 1985; Seldin, 1987).

Faculty development programs would be wise to move a step beyond their formal programs to take notice of faculty achievements and acknowledge them. In one program, for example, the developer keeps a stack of "congratulation cards" and sends a note to faculty members who have developed new courses, completed textbooks, or provided conscientious service on the teaching excellence committee. Yet another program provides small grants—as little as $100.00 is appreciated—for "great ideas in teaching." Finally, one program at a university in the Northeast hosts a yearly dinner for over two hundred faculty members in "Celebration of Teaching." The dinner provides an occasion at which members of the campus community come together to support, indeed celebrate, the importance of teaching. The dinner has become a highly visible way for individuals—from the chancellor to distinguished teaching award winners to junior faculty teaching fellows—to affirm their commitment to teaching. Originally supported by an external grant, the dinner is now funded by the academic administration. If one were seeking a single strategy for faculty development during hard times, such acknowledgments might be a place to begin.

Conclusion

Given these past few years of budget cuts, developers could easily contemplate putting their hopes for the future growth of faculty, students, and their programs on hold. Faculty development programs are small vessels in the tidal changes that are rolling over higher education in these last hours of the century. But we have found encouraging evidence that many faculty developers are navigating the uncertain waters successfully. Providing more

services with less support, protecting the status quo, and in some cases even nurturing programmatic growth, many faculty developers are exhibiting resourcefulness and adaptability. Some of the above descriptions illustrate judicious risk-taking and expansion, and some depict pragmatic paring down to essentials. And it is just possible that a forced reexamination of values and priorities will allow us to emerge stronger from these hard times.

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