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Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Opening the Door: Faculty Leadership in Institutional Change

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As faculty, we often feel overwhelmed by a heavy workload, conflicting demands on our time, and an imperfect evaluation system. Heavy teaching loads are augmented by the continuing need to keep up with ongoing changes in our disciplines and the constant development of new teaching technologies. Misuse and abuse of student evaluations of teaching is common, and many faculty report frustration at the double bind caused by their belief that they should do something to improve their evaluations and uncertainty about what they could do to improve student response if they tried. This frustration is compounded by the fact that they may not see a connection between improving student evaluations and improving student learning, which is the core of faculty work.

In many cases, faculty discomfort is augmented by a mismatch between their personal goals and their perception of institutional priorities. In a 2004 – 2005 survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), “being a good teacher” was cited as a very important personal goal for almost all faculty, independent of whether they work at a small college or a large university. The only other goal selected to be very important by more than ninety percent of faculty from all institutional types was “being a good colleague.” By contrast, “becoming an authority in my field” was cited as a very important goal by about half of all faculty and by

about two thirds of that subset of faculty working at universities, well behind “serving as a role model for students” and “developing a meaningful philosophy of life.” In the same survey, more than four fifths of faculty indicate that their institutions do not reward faculty for being good teachers, and only about half believe their institutions provide adequate support for faculty development (Lindholm, Szelenyi, Hurtado, & Korn, 2005). In such an environment, where faculty and institutional goals appear to be in conflict, one should not be surprised if faculty retreat behind the closed doors of their classrooms to teach in isolation.

While such a response is understandable, it leaves intact a cultural construct in which faculty who desire to be good teachers—almost all faculty—too often experience themselves as victims to student evaluations, uncaring colleagues, and an administration characterized by benign neglect. In this essay, I propose that we, as faculty, do indeed have the resources we need to improve our situation. I also suggest ways in which we might begin to gain more control over our teaching and our lives while building an academic culture that supports us as teachers.

To begin, we must first recognize that we are empowered to foster change, since the culture in which we feel trapped is created and sustained by us, the faculty. As a corollary, little institutional change is possible without our leadership since we are the cultural drivers. Secondly, any change initiative intended to create an environment more supportive of teaching and teachers can draw on the inherent desire of faculty to be good teachers and colleagues as documented in the HERI survey. Finally, since faculty as a collective are a rich resource of teaching wisdom, all that most campuses lack to foster real change are regular occasions to share this wisdom. Given this context, a small investment of time and our willingness to seek colleagues with whom to work are sufficient to develop a program of regular meetings and shared observations that can foster cultural change.

Most faculty value opportunities for collaboration and discussion that leads to more effective teaching (Wergin, 2003). Teaching Circles are a good way to capitalize on this natural inclination while building a more supportive community. Teaching Circles differ from most

faculty development workshops or retreats in several ways. They meet over a sustained period of time—typically a semester or more—and participants commit to attending every week so that they can build the trust necessary to sustain a substantive and challenging dialogue. To support the development of trust, Circles are limited to twelve or fewer participants, and participants are asked to hold in confidence the topics of conversation and the contributions of their colleagues. Teaching Circles do not have agendas; participants are asked to talk about whatever joys or challenges they are currently facing in their teaching, which provides immediacy and relevance that many participants find refreshing. Finally, participants are asked to focus on what they bring to the classroom as teachers and what they can do to create change as opposed to complaining about the students or other diversions. To keep the discussion on track, Circles typically agree at the outset on ground rules, and if there is not already a designated facilitator, a faculty participant is appointed to serve in that role.

Administrators can be asked to support teaching Circles in two significant ways. At some schools, the college administration has agreed to underwrite the lunch expenses for Teaching Circles that occur over the noon hour, or snacks and beverages for late afternoon offerings. In addition, key administrators can help publicize Teaching Circles, facilitating the extension of participation across disciplinary boundaries. Cross disciplinary teaching discussions are particularly fruitful since colleagues from other disciplines can introduce us to different pedagogies and help us unpack some of the disciplinary assumptions that might be holding us back as teachers. However, since Teaching Circles are discussions led by faculty for faculty, it is wise to limit administrator's role to providing publicity and financial support for sustenance and encouraging (but not monitoring or mandating) participation. Limiting the draw on administrative resources to support Teaching Circles has the added benefit of making it easier for administrators to say yes!

Exchanges of classroom observations are another great way to begin to build a community of teaching faculty. Teaching Circle participants can split into groups that visit one another's courses, which can enrich the Circle discussions or, alternatively, observations can be arranged as a separate program. Classroom observation

exchanges have the added virtue of requiring no resources other than colleagues with whom to work. In many ways, trios of faculty working together are optimal since two observers are present for each class visit, which provides two viewpoints and enriches the related discussions. If trios are not practical, pairs work too.

In approaching colleagues to arrange exchanges, remember that it is often intimidating for faculty, even (perhaps, especially) experienced, well-regarded, senior faculty, to invite colleagues into their classroom to observe and then discuss their teaching. Still, it is up to us to take the initiative to ask, trusting in the inherent desire of our peers to be good teachers and colleagues. In addition, we need to propose an observation process that will facilitate an open, honest dialogue about teaching, and there is a wide variety of readily available resources on class observation to help us with this step. A hyperlink to one free online resource is included in the article references.

I do not want to end this article without acknowledging the difficulty of bringing about cultural change. Although it does not need to take a lot of time on any single day, it takes real and sustained focus to overcome the inertia of our cultural patterns, and the pace of our lives can make it difficult to sustain this focus. Once a new term has started and we are enmeshed in its rhythm, arranging a series of weekly lunches or observation exchanges is particularly difficult. In recognition of that difficulty, I try to organize these types of activities several weeks or months before the start of the academic term in which they will happen so that participants can prioritize them in their schedules. Even then, not everyone who expresses an interest will be able to do so in a given term. Fortunately, you can rely on your campus teaching excellence center, faculty development coordinator, or a sympathetic administrator to aid in sustaining a Teaching Circle or classroom observation initiative.

Finally, we need to recognize that beyond planning and the relentless pace of academic life, our biggest hurdle is often our own hesitation to broach discussions about teaching in an environment where research is rewarded over commitment to students and to the improvement of teaching. For change to occur, someone has to start the conversation on your campus, and there is good reason to believe that our colleagues are anxious to join the conversation once started.

I encourage you to be a catalyst for change in your life and at your institution. And please share your experiences—I'd like to know.

Resources

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Essays on Teaching Excellence

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