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Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Engaging Faculty in New Forms of Teaching and Learning

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In 2000, I wrote a white paper (Hagner, 2000) examining faculty engagement and support in new teaching environments as part of my year as a National Learning Infrastructure Initiatives (NLII) Fellow. In that paper, I argued that the degree to which faculty adopt new forms of teaching and learning is highly dependent on the motivational state of the individual faculty member. While I still believe this to be the case, the largest change that has occurred in the last three years is the degree to which faculty now have a choice in whether to transform the way they teach.

Sources of Pressure

Faculty are now being pressured by 1) their institutional leaders who believe, oftentimes erroneously, that technology-enhanced education, especially distance learning, will result in more students and dollars; 2) a corporate sector that is demanding more technologically-literate graduates; and 3) a growing percentage of students who have been exposed to new forms of teaching and learning during their high school years and expect it to be part of their college experience.

To this list of sources of pressure I will add a fourth: the faculty themselves. Even those who pay only scant attention to the professional dialogues involving teaching and learning know that

deeper learning is achieved through more interactive and visual forms of content presentation (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking 2000). Any faculty member who cares a scintilla about her students knows that they do not respond to the traditional delivery of content in the same way that we did. I remain quite optimistic that understanding our students in this way will also compel faculty to reevaluate how they present course material.

Pace of Faculty Engagement

Because of these reasons and others, I believe the pace of faculty engagement will increase at a much faster rate than I thought only three years ago. This will have a significant impact, obviously, on institutional support and training resources. There are two important issues to discuss in relation to how colleges and universities will deal with this ever-increasing demand.

First, as I argued three years ago, support staff have to consider the underlying motivations of the faculty who appear, and don't appear, in their offices. Borrowing and adapting from Everett Rogers (1995), I posited four types of faculty with respect to the transformation of teaching.

Entrepreneurs are those who are tech-savvy and adventurous about adapting new technologies to their teaching and learning. As a general rule, however, this type of faculty does not play well with others. They are less likely to want to play a mentor role for other faculty members. They are, however, frequent companions of support staff with whom they are often on an "equal footing." A real danger lies in the support staff using the entrepreneurial faculty member as a guide to design support spaces and processes. This group is not typical of most users of support services.

Second Wave faculty should be the key focus for support services. These faculty see the importance, and perhaps the inevitability, of new forms of teaching and learning. What they lack is the skill and the confidence to start the transformation process. A cardinal rule for this group is: adoption of technology for teaching and learning is inversely proportional to the effort they must exert. They want to focus on teaching and learning, not on technology issues. This type has a high percentage of good teachers who are uncertain whether or

not a change will alter this fact. A support system that does not take these factors into consideration will work against successful transformations.

Careerists are those faculty who will consider transforming their teaching and learning only when the professional environment promotes and rewards these activities. Schools with a high proportion of this type, usually larger research universities, will find transformation to be a much longer process, because changes in the reward structure usually occur glacially. One optimistic note is the rise in sites that feature learning objects developed by faculty and then reviewed by other faculty (MERLOT – www.merlot.org – is perhaps the best example). This allows the faculty member to gain professional recognition (and credit) for the innovative use of technology in teaching.

The Reluctants are those faculty who, for a variety of possible reasons, refuse to acknowledge the sea change and steadfastly hold to traditional delivery forms. I am certainly not going to advocate any draconian program to bring these faculty kicking and screaming into the 21st century. But I am also not advocating that those interested in transformation throw up their hands and ignore these faculty. Here is the danger I see. The new forms of interactive teaching and learning conform much more closely to how students assimilate information on their own than do the traditional classroom presentations. It follows that students will respond more positively to those faculty who use the new techniques than to those who don't. "Respond more positively" translates to better teaching evaluations. If the reward structure in the institution is influenced by measures of teaching evaluation, then the Reluctants will more and more start suffering in comparison. I believe that there is an institutional obligation to avoid alienating this group, a high percentage of whom are older faculty with years of service to the institution.

Inclusion of Faculty

Attempts at systemic transformation must take the "mix" of faculty types into account during the earliest stages of planning. Inclusion of faculty at this stage is essential. As I implied in the opening of this essay, we are talking about fundamental changes to how faculty do their jobs. This is not something that can be imposed upon the

faculty member; they must be partners in the process. At the University of Hartford, I spent a semester interviewing our full-time faculty in order to assess their attitudes towards new forms of teaching and learning and to find out what they needed in order to begin the transformation process. This assessment had three important outcomes. First, it allowed our team to get a sense of our "mix" of faculty. Second, it enabled us to direct resources to those areas identified by the Second Wave faculty as being essential precursors to their transformation efforts. Third, and to our surprise most importantly, the interview process created an environment of inclusion and partnership between the faculty and the administration. Subsequent strategic planning efforts had high levels of faculty support mainly due to the fact that they were tied in to the earlier assessment phase. We believe that we have made significant progress over the past three years and that this success can be traced back to the inclusive assessment groundwork we did at the beginning.

The second thing to consider is that there is a "beware of what you wish for" dimension to the transformation process. As I argued at the introduction of this essay, transformation will be happening on your campus. As I just argued, the speed and quality of that transformation will be related to the level of faculty inclusion in the planning process. However, careful attention must be paid to the support side of the equation. Many institutions, in attempting to encourage faculty experimentation, have provided good individual support, an effective strategy in the earliest stages of transformation. The problem is that, as the transformation process starts to accelerate, these support systems become overwhelmed and can actually slow the transformation process as growing numbers of frustrated faculty opt out at a crucial point in the process. Your support and training services must be able to scale with rising demands. This means making tough choices on what activities will be supported and how to adjust the training process from individuals to groups.

Three Factors in Transformation

After examining a wide variety of success stories (and quite a few failures as well), I believe that there are three crucial factors that influence successful transformation. First and foremost is leadership. Without an assurance of leadership commitment to the process, progress will be isolated to sub-areas within the institution. Systemic

transformation does not come about as a grassroots effort. Second in importance, as detailed above, is inclusion. All of those who will be affected by the transformation process need to have the opportunity to participate in the earliest stages of planning. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of buy-in, especially on the part of faculty, to successful transformation. Finally, effective communication of all phases of the transformation—planning, implementation, assessment— is essential.

I have been a teacher now for over twenty-five years; I tell anyone who will listen to me that the last three years, using new forms of teaching and learning, have been the most exiting and rewarding of my career. I wish you luck in your attempts to generate the same feelings at your institution.

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