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Fellow travelers: Taking stock of faculty fellows programs in the age of organizational development

Susan A. Colby, Laura Cruz, Danielle Cordaro, and Clare Cruz

Abstract

Faculty fellows have long served as a staple of centers for teaching and learning (CTLs), but to date little to no evidence has been gathered regarding their broader impact. The current study provides a snapshot of U.S.-based faculty fellows programs today, based on a comprehensive review of CTL websites. We categorize faculty fellows programs across five modalities that reflect decades of evolution and adaptation in the field of educational development. Our findings are intended to provide the foundation for new pathways of research, practice, and inquiry regarding the implementation of CTL fellowship programs.

Keywords: educational development, organizational development, fellows, programming

Does your center for teaching and learning (CTL) (or similar unit) have faculty fellows associated with it? If so, you are not alone, as faculty fellows are considered a staple of educational development work. Indeed, if one were to look at historical lists of programming standards for CTLs in the United States, the integration of faculty fellows

would appear as one of the most enduring practices in the field (Wright, 2002). Despite this longevity, the body of evidence to support the practice remains scattered, focused largely on assessing the impact of individual programs. The current study provides a snapshot of fellowship programs in the United States today, as the product of (often) decades of evolution and adaptation, and lays the foundation for new pathways of research, practice, and inquiry intended to sustain these fellowship programs into the future of educational development.

Background & Literature Review

Although the precise origin of CTL fellowship programs has been lost, educational historians might not find it surprising that the relatively new practice of educational development attached itself to the venerable role of fellow, with its long pedigree in academia. The 15th-century etymological origins of the word suggest a fellow is a person (of either gender) that has a stake in a collective enterprise (Clark, 2000). In the case of the dons Oxford or Cambridge, this could mean a political stake, including responsibility for governance, or in the case of self-funded research institutes. It could also mean an economic stake, denoting a reciprocal investment of resources. By the 18th century, the term had broadened to include an appointment as part of an extra-academic, and often elite, learned society, and therefore the title came to be perceived as honorific, denoting both status and influence within the field (De Beer, 1950). Our study suggests that fellowship programs in educational development display elements of all these historical characteristics, in addition to emerging roles that reflect the current climate of teaching and learning in higher education.

Faculty fellows are frequently referenced as standard programming practice for educational developers, including multiple mentions in the seminal *A Guide to Faculty Development* (Gillespie, 2002; Gillespie & Robertson, 2010). That being said, faculty fellows programs have not

been the subject of much critical evaluation in the research literature. The few studies that have been published are primarily focused on the description and evaluation of a single cohort of fellows, usually from the same institution (Austin, 1992b; Hermann et al., 2008; Kaza et al., 2016; Middendorf, 1998; Smith et al., 2020). One notable exception is research on the long-term impact of the Lilly Fellows program (Austin, 1992a; List, 1997), but otherwise there appears to be considerable room for more a systematic investigation of what faculty fellows programs in educational development are, what function(s) they currently serve, and what their potential role in the evolving mission of CTLs can be.

Part of the explanation behind this relative lack of scholarly attention may lie in the wide range of interpretations of the function of faculty fellows. Virginia Lee suggests that fellows may “work on a project, develop a program, or perform a service negotiated with the center” (Lee, 2010, p. 27). Both Middendorf (1998) and Smith et al. (2020) assert the value of fellowships for peer learning, and Horii (2010) contends that fellows can serve as important catalysts for institutional change. Other studies intermingle the title of fellow with other common modalities in educational development, including faculty learning communities and project-based small grant programs. The problem is compounded by the fact that faculty fellows programs appear frequently in association with offices of service learning, institutional assessment, and diversity and inclusion, all of which bear some relationship to educational development work (Bowen & Kiser, 2009; Bringle et al., 2000; Harwood et al., 2005). Viewed collectively, the practice of using faculty fellows appears to be sufficiently varied that a shared definition of the components, purpose, and practices associated with such fellowships does not exist, at least not yet.

There does seem to be one common thread that runs throughout fellowship programs. In the second edition of *A Guide to Faculty Development*, Lee (2010) contends that fellows exist primarily to “build relationships with the faculty” (p. 27). Indeed, if relationships are one of the four foundations of work in the field, as Wright,

Lohe et al. (2018) contend, then the significance of fellowships as a means to formalize these relationships on a reciprocal basis becomes clear. Even so, the relationship between faculty and educational developers continues to evolve as our field matures, making fellowship a dynamic concept that can take multiple forms.

Presently, CTLs enjoy a multiplicity of relationships with the faculty with whom they serve, work with, and/or partner. If fellowship is viewed disaggregately, the current practice appears to encompass a range of functions that have arisen through the evolution of the field. When educational (then faculty) development first took hold in the United States, for example, the emphasis tended to be on bridging the growing body of scholarship on teaching and learning with the work faculty were doing in the classrooms. For this reason, Sorcinelli et al. (2006) deemed the 1950s and 1960s as the “age of the scholar.” There are a handful of existing faculty fellows programs that reflect this perspective, with faculty serving roles similar to a scholar in residence, bringing expertise, new perspectives, and ongoing research to the table. Following the age of the scholar, the authors posited the subsequent age (the 1960s and 1970s) to be that of the teacher, with a particular focus on the growth of individual faculty as educators. This emphasis can be seen in the design of many faculty fellows programs today, with participating faculty completing individual projects of their own making to primarily further their own development.

By the 1980s, with the proliferation of CTLs across the country, the work of educational development became increasingly professionalized and attention was given to the role of the developer, which rapidly expanded beyond work with individual faculty members or single courses. During this time, there was increasing recognition that being an educational developer required a distinct set of knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience (Sorcinelli et al., 2006). The spirit of this age, too, is reflected in the design of contemporary faculty fellows programs, particularly those that frame the fellowship as a form of apprenticeship, equipping participants with the tools of the trade to both enable and empower them as educational developers in their own right.

Sorcinelli et al. (2006) characterize the 1990s as the age of the learner, with particular attention to some of the dramatic breakthroughs arising from the learning sciences. These insights have often served as the basis of collaborative faculty fellow programs, in which the participants each work to integrate trans-disciplinary learning principles into their respective disciplinary containers. And that spirit of collaboration extends into the 2000s, with its emphasis on building relationships across campuses, including perhaps anointing faculty fellows as ambassadors or liaisons between the CTL and other campus units (Shinnar & Williams, 2008).

As we reach our current age, variously characterized as the age of assessment or the age of organizational development, we also see CTLs coming in from the margins, shedding some of their roots in service, and taking on roles as leaders and drivers of change (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013; Kelley et al., 2017; Schroeder, 2011). And our strength as change leaders comes from our networks and deep-seated, long-standing relationships with our faculty, which can serve as the basis for an emerging form of fellowship, one in which faculty partners serve as levers or linchpins to foster vibrant communities of teaching and learning and extend the teaching and learning capacity of the institution and beyond (Cruz, 2018; Felten et al., 2007; Stark & Smith, 2016).

Multiple aspects of each of these modalities for faculty fellowship have been studied by others. Course design or project grants, often associated with faculty fellowships as learners or teachers, for example, have been shown to have demonstrable impact on teaching transformation and student learning (Wright, Horii, et al., 2018). Faculty learning communities, which fellowships as apprenticeships or networks often resemble, have been studied extensively (Richlin & Cox, 2004). The value of building faculty networks has been touched upon in research both in the scholarship of educational development and in higher education research more broadly (Roxå et al., 2011; Verwoord & Poole, 2016). Theories of change and transformation models abound, especially in the literature on STEM education

(Henderson et al., 2011; Kezar et al., 2015). To date, however, these insights have not been integrated into focused studies on the role of faculty fellows and fellowship programs.

The present study seeks to close the distance between research and practice by providing a systematic study of the current state of faculty fellows programs in the United States, as reflected in CTL web pages. We argue that in the current age of organizational development, it may be necessary to rethink the role, responsibilities, and position of our old standard, in order to keep our faculty fellows as vital components of our centers, our field, and our communities (Beach et al., 2016).

The Study

The Population

This study covers CTLs that had registered members of the POD Network, the professional organization for educational developers in the United States. From this registry the researchers reviewed 1,281 CTL websites for evidence of faculty fellows programs (search terms included *faculty fellow*, *fellow*, *ambassador*, and *scholar*). To be included in the study, each CTL website had to meet the following criteria: (a) there was sufficient information on the website as of July 1, 2020; (b) the posting date was 2016 or later; (c) participants included faculty and/or instructors; and (d) the higher education institution had a searchable Carnegie Classification. We found 220 fellowship programs that met eligibility criteria and were therefore used in this study (17% of total CTLs).

Method and Findings

The study utilized two types of evidence: the characteristics of each fellowship program and the associated narrative description.

Characteristics of CTL Fellowship Programs

Method. For each fellowship program identified from CTL websites, the researchers recorded basic information, including the duration of program, number of faculty participants, compensation methods and amounts, and selection process for fellows. This data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine both median characteristics and range of practice.

Findings. This environmental scan revealed that a typical CTL fellowship program consists of eight to 10 participants who are chosen through a competitive application process. The average program takes place over an academic year, and participants are compensated with a \$2,000 stipend for their efforts. It should be noted that compensation showed the greatest range, with multiple programs offering little to no monetary compensation and especially well-resourced programs combining stipends with other financial incentives, such as course releases. Selection showed the smallest range, with the majority of programs utilizing some form of selective application process. Number of participants was the most difficult property to calculate, as many programs did not articulate maximum or minimum thresholds for participation. For this reason, number was often inferred by counting the number of current fellows identified on the web page. None of these characteristics were strongly correlated with modality (see descriptions below). Overall, the administrative characteristics of CTL fellowship programs demonstrate a fair degree of consensus in practice. The same cannot be said for their functions.

Table 1. Characteristics of CTL Fellowship Programs (n = 220)

	Median response	Range	Notes
Number	8–10	1–24	Calculated annually
Selection	Selective application process	N/A	Alternatives included appointment, non-competitive application, self-identification/volunteer
Duration	Academic year	2 months–3 years	Includes summer semesters
Compensation	\$2,000	\$0–\$5,000	Calculated annually; indirect options included grants and course release

Modalities of CTL Fellowship Programs

Method. To analyze the narrative content retrieved from the CTL websites, the researchers utilized a three-stage coding process based on Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory model, which is frequently applied to educational contexts with a diversity of practice (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). In the first stage, three coders used an open, emergent coding process to identify shared themes. Five themes emerged related to the purpose and function of fellowship programs and were labeled as modalities: *honor*, *learning*, *advocacy*, *extension*, and *capacity*. The five modalities were used to categorize CTL faculty fellow programs, and this coding process is further explained in the next section.

Findings. The initial coding process revealed five composite categories based on a combination of purpose, outcome, and function for fellowship programs. These attributes, labeled as modalities, are defined below.

Table 2. Coded Themes: Modalities of CTL Fellowship Programs

Modality	Purpose	Common characteristics
Learning	Serves as a learning process for individuals (teaching and learning focus)	Often includes a program of study/ curriculum as well as social learning opportunities (e.g., learning communities)
Extension	Serves to extend the work of the CTL, not unlike a part-time employee	Often includes articulation of specific roles and responsibilities as well as training or certification in educational development skills
Advocacy	Provides leading voices for targeted initiatives	Often includes embedded positions (e.g., fellow in a particular college) as well as representatives at the institutional level; may be topic specific
Capacity	Serves to enable strategic affordances and facilitate organizational change	Includes an emphasis on institutional-level goals and initiatives
Honor	Serves as honorific, recognizing prior expertise, experience, or body of work and enhances legitimacy/prestige of CTL	Often includes peer selection or nomination and limited service expectations

Prioritization of CTL Fellowship Modalities

Method. Modalities were used as the basis of a second round of focused, structured coding, in which each researcher rated the priorities of a set of fellowship programs using a Likert scale (0–5) with 1 as the most prominent modality and 5 as the least prominent modality. All programs were assigned a modality code of 1 for the modality that most strongly aligned with its purpose and function. Modality codes of 2, 3, 4, and 5 were assigned only when programs exhibited alignment to the modality and were then assigned in order of prominence. A zero rating was used to indicate that the modality was not present. The three co-researchers compared coding results and utilized convenience samples from the full data set to interrogate our individual and shared understandings of each of the modalities and further calibrate our definitions and ratings. A third (and final) round of structured coding was conducted by a single coder to ensure consistency and validity of the proposed theoretical model.

Findings. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the majority of CTL fellowship programs (59%, $n = 130$) placed the highest priority on learning. These programs were easy to identify, as fellows were engaged in familiar educational development activities such as course redesign, mentoring programs, specialty certification programs, or conducting scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) or other related types of research on an individual level. The second highest priority for faculty fellows programs was extension (28%, $n = 61$). Nearly one-third of all programs were primarily established to extend CTL activity on campus with fellows performing standard CTL functions such as leading workshops, providing consultations, and facilitating new faculty orientation or course design institutes.

Less than 15% of programs were assigned a modality code of 1 for advocacy (6%, $n = 13$), honor (4%, $n = 8$), and capacity (4%, $n = 8$). Fellowships with a high priority on advocacy promoted specific initiatives such as transforming STEM, redesigning general education, or promoting high-impact practices. Fellowships with a high priority

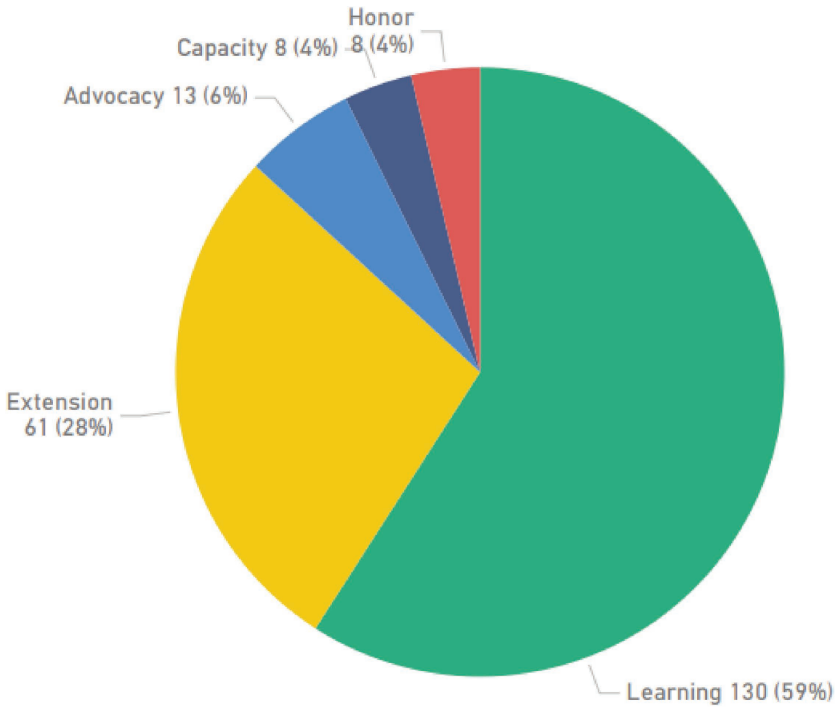


Figure 1. Pie Chart of CTL Fellowship Modality Code of 1 (highest priority) (n = 220)

on honor tended to leverage faculty members with advanced qualifications, credentials, or expertise most often aligned with exemplary teaching or research. Finally, fellowships with a high priority on capacity were markedly different in their focus and activity. Fellows served as leaders with a comparatively large degree of autonomy for engaging in complex work with the goal of systemic and institutional change.

Priority distribution. It was immediately evident that the priority of fellowship modalities were not equally distributed across the CTLs surveyed, as reflected in Figure 2. The average fellowship program was assigned three codes with the highest priority of either learning, advocacy, or extension. Honor and capacity rarely emerged as the highest priority for a fellowship program; however, both modalities were often

assigned a code of 4 or 5. While most programs did not appear to intentionally honor individuals, in the many cases where participants were competitively selected, their connection to the CTL became a source of honor not only to the faculty participant but also, by extension, to the CTL. By framing service to the CTL as an honor, in other words, the CTL can increase the collective esteem in which the work of the CTL is held. Capacity was also rarely articulated directly and was often coded as an implicit value associated with the cumulative benefits of other forms of fellowship programs.

Prioritization by institutional type. Priority differences were also evident by institutional types, as reflected in Figure 3. While learning and extension remained high priorities across all five Carnegie Classifications, there was evidence that modality of fellowships may be sensitive to institutional mission. Community colleges (Associate’s), for example, were more likely to utilize fellows programs to extend CTL activity, likely a reflection of the existence of large pools of adjunct faculty and/or limited resources for full-time developers. Liberal arts institutions (Baccalaureate), long known for their teaching missions, were more likely to have learning as the highest priority. Special Focus

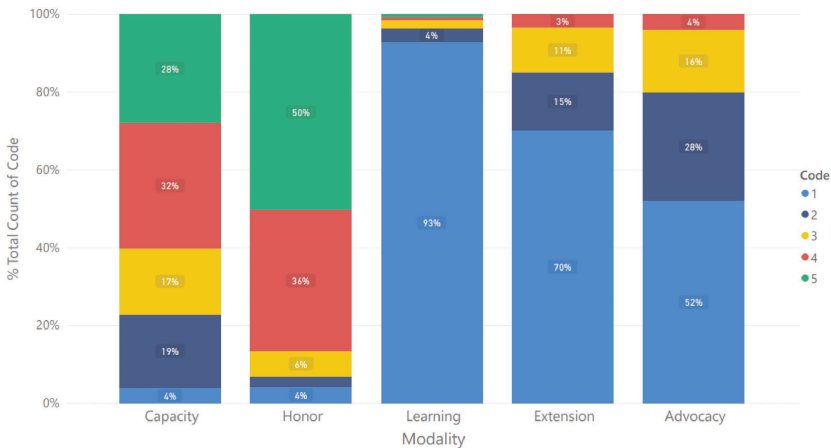


Figure 2. 100% Stacked Bar Chart of Fellowship Modality by Modality Code (n = 220)

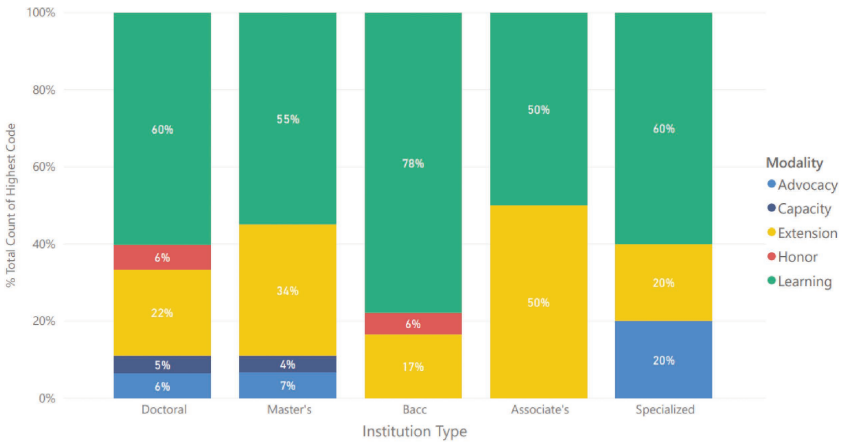


Figure 3. 100% Stacked Bar Chart of Modality Code 1 by Institution Type and Fellowship Modality (n = 220)

Note. n = 5 Specialized (Special Focus), 16 Associate's, 18 Baccalaureate, 73 Master's, 108 Doctoral.

institutions were more than twice as likely to emphasize advocacy, a modality that focuses on building networks across, in this case, institutions with relatively focused missions. The patterns also suggest some potentially significant omissions. Honor is evident as a priority, for example, in both research and liberal arts institutions (and not the other institutional types), a reflection, perhaps, of their historical pursuit of institutional prestige. The distribution of extension seems to be sensitive to resource capacity, with relatively well-resourced institutional types placing comparatively less emphasis on this modality compared to those institutions with greater dependency on often-shrinking state funding. Less funding, in other words, could lead to greater need to extend the work of the CTL through part-time, temporary fellows rather than additional full-time staffing.

Discussion

This study has endeavored to provide an environmental scan of existing fellowship programs embedded in CTLs in the United States,

including defining characteristics, functions, and relative priorities. This proffered scan is not a perfect replication, as it relies on an analysis of descriptions of these programs as they are listed on public websites, which are flawed mirrors of actual practice. These may be especially distorted for lower-resourced institutions, who are more likely to have limited capacity for web development and continuous editing. Despite these known flaws, the CTL website remains a primary entryway into programs and initiatives for faculty, so we chose to focus on assessing the program descriptions as faculty (and, by extension, staff and administrators) would experience them.

The limitations of the method should be weighed along with its benefits. Web scraping proved to be conducive to gathering input from a very wide range of CTLs, encompassing multiple institutional types. This permitted the researchers to supplement previous research, which focused primarily on individual fellows programs, with a much broader view of the practice as a whole. Our findings suggest that fellowship programs tend to be administered similarly, but they range considerably in their primary goals and functions. That range is sufficiently wide to defy attempts to provide a common definition for such programs, but we believe that there may be strategies for disentangling this terminological inconsistency.

First, our environmental scan revealed that CTLs frequently combine the title *fellow* with other known programming models, such as communities of practice, learning communities, and course redesign (and similar) grants. The preponderance of the learning modality in our sample reflects this intermixing. In these cases, the term *fellow* is likely used because of its honorific connotations (i.e., it looks good on a CV), but the practice runs the risk of devaluing the credibility of fellowship itself. We recommend that programs that primarily focus on individual faculty development be categorized as belonging to these other, long-standing and well-recognized programming models. Fellowship programs and initiatives, however, should serve the distinct function of connecting the faculty member to larger contexts, whether the CTL, the college/department, the university, or some combination

of all of these. Sharpening the definition of the term would enable the advancement of the fellowship programs both in practice and as the subject of further research.

Making these connections has become an increasing priority for CTLs across the United States, particularly as the focus of the field of educational development has shifted toward an organizational development orientation. This has led to a renaissance of interest in building new or redesigning existing fellowship programs, particularly those focused on the modalities of advocacy and capacity building. This renewed interest was evident in high attendance at POD Network conference sessions on faculty fellows and is seen in the increased frequency of the topic on the always lively POD Network listserv over the past two years. The need for this form of fellowship is underscored by recent studies of imposter syndrome in educational development, which indicates that many practitioners feel under-confident in their abilities to act as levers of institutional change on their own (Rudenga & Gravett, 2020).

This increased emphasis on advocacy and capacity building begs questions of valuation. As we (the researchers) articulated the modalities used in this study, we frequently asked ourselves whether the modalities were discrete categories or if they constituted a continuum, with capacity building serving as the highest, or most desired and perhaps most advanced, form. After considerable discussion, we chose instead to present the modalities as a range of practices without implicit valuation.

We based this decision on several factors. One noted by-product of the current age of organizational development is that CTLs have found themselves increasingly embedded in their local institutional contexts (Geertsema, 2016), which means that educational development practice has been in a period of considerable divergence since the late 2000s (Kelley et al., 2017). Thus, now, more than ever, there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to educational development challenges. As a fellowship modality, capacity building may be most closely linked to current aspirations for the field, but it may or may not be the most

appropriate modality to meet the needs of a specific CTL, embedded as it is in a distinctive institutional culture.

These circumstances also make it difficult to identify models of fellowship programs that may be worthy of emulation, as what works well in one context may not be as effective when transplanted to another. The identification of exemplary models is also compounded by the lack of common evaluation standards for fellowship programs. For the most part, the CTL websites we visited made little mention of evaluation beyond participation and representation (i.e., the selected fellows represented a range of disciplines, units, and/or ranks). To be fair, the public web scraping method used in this study is not conducive to a study of local evaluation methods, which are likely to be internally collected.

This approach is, however, well suited to ask broader questions about the collective return on investment for fellowship programs in the field writ large. As a signature program in educational development, we invite scholars and practitioners alike to consider what value fellowships contribute to the collective toolkit of the profession. This study was intended to provide a portrait of current fellowship practice with the intention of opening up lines of conversation regarding how educational developers might want to shape these practices heading into the future. What might these shared aspirations for fellowship programs become?

We pose this question at a pivotal time in higher education, when pundits and scholars alike are only just beginning to grapple with the prospect of a post-pandemic future. One possible so-called COVID rainbow is that the shared experience of remote teaching and learning across the globe has significantly widened the circle of participants in conversations about teaching and learning. At the same time, it has further underscored the value and significance of connecting to colleagues, whether through networks of care or communities of practice or as fellows in invisible (e.g., virtual) academic societies that function not unlike their historical antecedents (Bharati & Singh, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Nocco et al., 2021; Zuccala, 2006).

Indeed, educational activist bell hooks describes engaged teaching itself as a form of intellectual fellowship, one that connects those who teach (or support teaching) not only to the students but also to one another as fellow travelers toward a brighter world ahead (hooks, 1994, p. 205).

Biographies

Susan Colby is the Director of Faculty Professional Development for the Center for Academic Excellence and Professor and former Chair in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Appalachian State University. She is a member of the American Council on Education Fellows Class of 2021–2022. Her research interests include educational development, leadership development, and assessing teaching quality.

Laura Cruz is an Associate Research Professor of Teaching and Learning Scholarship with the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence at Penn State. She is the former director of two centers for teaching and learning, the former editor of *To Improve the Academy*, and the author of numerous publications in the scholarship of educational development.

Danielle Cordaro, Associate Professor of English, became the founding director of the Center for Faculty Development in 2021 at the University of Mount Union, where she worked for 10 years as the Director of the Digital, Written and Oral Communication Studio. Her professional interests include literacy, program design, and increasing the density of faculty networks in the service of organizational development.

Clare Cruz is an incoming graduate student in the Master of Statistical Practice program at Carnegie Mellon University. She is also a recent graduate of the University of Pittsburgh with a degree in statistics with related areas in computer science and mathematics.

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