Ten Principles of Good Practice in Creating and Sustaining Teaching and Learning Centers

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n the long run, it is the integrated approach that may prove to be most effective and cost efficient. It is also the one that we see being discussed more and more frequently.

Once a unit is established, it is the responsibility of its director to mine how to use existing resources most effectively so as to meet priorities established for the unit. One must understand the need for exploration of alternatives and, at times, the need for trade-offs. This is never an easy task, but it is an essential one. The ensuing chapters of this volume elaborate upon aspects of faculty, instructional, organizational development.

REFERENCES


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BACKGROUND

The 1990s may be remembered as the decade of teaching and learning. The research in both areas has exploded, resulting in findings that promise to improve practice inside and outside the college classroom. As more colleges and universities have accorded higher priority to student learning, they have also begun to offer enhanced teaching support through consultation services, funding incentives, workshops, and institutes—faculty, instructional, and organizational development undertakings. Increasingly, institutions have looked to teaching centers to take on the responsibility of administering these initiatives because centers are in a unique position to help teachers put new knowledge about pedagogy to work. Such centers already exist at many colleges and universities, with more established each year.

As a faculty developer, I have had the experience of starting two teaching centers at major research universities over the past two decades (Sorcinelli, 1988; Sorcinelli & Aitken, 1995). I have also visited a number of campuses to explore with faculty and academic leaders the feasibility of creating a teaching center or enhancing current faculty development offerings. Several questions have guided my own practice and my consultations with others.

- What should be the key goals of a center?
- What staff, faculty, and administrative issues need to be addressed in developing a center?
- What teaching, learning, and faculty development issues would individuals most like to explore with colleagues?
- What are the institution’s biggest assets in developing a center?
- What are the biggest challenges to making things work?
These questions form a foundation for the guiding principles that have directed my work in teaching centers; in fact, their answers are implicit in the principles discussed below.

**PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE**

The experience of any one individual or campus cannot be generalized to all institutions. Individuals need to shape a faculty development center to fit their institutional culture. Still, it is important to share our best ideas so that thinking about what works at one institution might provoke creative ideas and spinoffs on other campuses. The goal is to help us all do our work better. To that end, I offer ten principles of good practice in faculty development, directed toward creating new programs and strengthening established ones.

A few caveats should be mentioned. These principles are not ten commandments; they are guidelines for getting started. They also are not perfectly linear; rather they follow a loose progression, starting from before a center exists and moving to when a center is in place. The grouping of principles is loose as well. Many deal with leadership issues (e.g., getting faculty and administrators involved, suggesting what the center should offer) while a few deal with the nuts and bolts of managing a center (e.g., getting space, funds). Under each principle, I outline best practices in the field of faculty development, based on research, and describe different approaches to good practice that have been used by our own Center for Teaching and other centers as well (Ambrose, 1995; Eble & McKeachie, 1985; Eison & Sorcinelli, 1999; Lindquist, 1978; Nelson & Siegel, 1980; Nemko & Simpson, 1991; Sorcinelli, 1988; Sorcinelli & Aitken, 1995; Wheeler & Schuster 1990; Zahorski, 1993).

**Principle 1: Build Stakeholders by Listening to All Perspectives**

Teaching centers often occupy a unique place in the structure of an institution because their mission is to address the interests and needs of the entire academic community in support of the education that students receive. The best programs maintain a neutral posture. They are primarily faculty-based—a role which is different from most administrative offices. While they are first and foremost advocates for faculty in their role as teachers, they are also part of the administration. Ideally, the center should provide support and service to academic leaders—without being perceived as an arm of the administration—as well as to faculty in order to further the agenda for teaching excellence. In determining issues to address and priorities to set, a center stands a better chance if it is designed in direct response to the concerns of all constituencies—faculty, teaching assistants, administrators, and students. The faculty developer must be prepared to sometimes walk the tightrope in a delicate balancing act but must also recognize that the center needs the assistance of all of these constituencies to build consensus on the best use of its resources.

How might a center figure out the concerns of various constituencies, especially the faculty? Some institutions test the interest in a center through a needs assessment that can be conducted internally or by an external consultant. Such an assessment can be helpful in identifying important assets and challenges that face the proposed center. As soon as the center opens, it should develop ongoing structures for soliciting ideas. In our center, we first interviewed faculty who had been involved in informal teaching development activities. Over time, we interviewed and surveyed new, midcareer, senior, and retired faculty to help fit our programs to differing faculty needs (Sorcinelli, 1988, 1992). We also established focus groups to assess the needs of department chairs and attended Deans’ Council meetings to gain understanding of the needs of schools and colleges (Sorcinelli, 1999a). At a personal level, my interviews, focus groups, and surveys of faculty, teaching assistants, students, and academic leaders have been invaluable. They have allowed me to immerse myself in the culture of the institution, offering me a more expansive view of both faculty and student cultures. These connections also helped develop friends of the center.

**Principle 2: Ensure Effective Program Leadership and Management**

Building stakeholders is difficult without someone designated to lead the way. Studies of teaching development programs indicate that having someone in the position to both manage and lead a program is critical for success (Eble & McKeachie, 1985; Sorcinelli, 1988; Zahorski, 1993). It is essential to have an individual who has the vision, commitment, time, and energy to take the lead in creating, developing, maintaining, and evaluating services. In larger centers, the appoint-
ment of a full-time director is the ideal. A full-time director position allows that individual to be present in the center and to find time to assess needs, develop meaningful contacts and activities, manage day-to-day office tasks, and conduct program evaluation. Most centers are small; even long-established, large research university centers typically have only two to four full-time faculty/staff professionals, a clerical staff person, and sometimes a teaching assistant or more. At smaller institutions, the model of a faculty member on release time has proved workable. In either case, because faculty usually call a person not an office, it is important for the director and staff to be highly visible and accessible so that faculty get to know the center.

I started both of my teaching centers from the beginning and directed them solo for a number of years. It can get lonely, so I encourage new directors to seek help with leading and managing programs early on. For example, before acquiring full-time staff, I brought distinguished teachers in as faculty associates to help out. Such individuals enriched the activities of the center by offering expertise on topics such as writing across the curriculum, teaching technologies, and multicultural issues. They also provided a sounding board for my ideas and concerns. Finally, they were exceedingly cost effective, requiring only one course released per year. In addition to professional support, clerical support, even half-time, is absolutely essential for routine activities such as answering the telephone and duplicating and for such time-consuming activities as workshop and conference management.

Once the institution appoints a director, and, hopefully, support staff, it is time to focus on the two key conditions necessary for moving a new center forward—faculty ownership and administrative support.

**Principle 3: Emphasize Faculty Ownership**

Studies indicate that faculty development programs are most effective when they have strong faculty ownership and involvement (Eble & McKeachie, 1985; Lindquist, 1978). Optimally, key leadership is provided by effective, respected teachers and scholars. Faculty ownership can ensure that the center remains responsive to faculty needs. It also provides a channel for the emergence of faculty who can take a leadership role in teaching development and renewal and student learning. While the director of a center must oversee and guide initiatives, the final product needs to be faculty inspired.

How might one engage faculty with an interest in teaching? Even before a formal center is proposed, most institutions have a core of committed and outstanding teachers who have been working at a grassroots level to address issues of effective teaching and learning. As suggested earlier, a first step for the new director of a teaching center is to seek out such well-respected faculty. These faculty can serve as allies to the center, raise its visibility, and assist in shaping and implementing programs. In several of our center’s ongoing programs (e.g., teaching development workshops, new faculty orientation, tenure and promotion seminars), we invite seasoned faculty to share their insights with pretenure faculty. Faculty also take a primary role in evaluating candidates for annual fellowships, grants, and awards. Modest incentives are not essential, but they do encourage involvement. These might include a title such as faculty associate or teaching mentor, a modest stipend, small funds for professional development, or release time from a course.

Establishing a dedicated advisory committee also can be helpful in ongoing governance. Such committees always have representation from faculty, and some include administrators as well. Some committees are elected and others appointed; either way, the inclusion of faculty and administrative opinion leaders is important. Committees should strive for diversity by balancing such factors as discipline, rank, gender, and race. At the same time, successful committees are often fairly small, usually consisting of eight to 12 members. My own experience suggests that a streamlined committee can more easily schedule meetings, develop into a collaborative working group, and deal with substantive issues than can a larger committee. The more substantive the role of the advisory committee, the more likely it is that faculty as a whole will support and use the program.

**Principle 4: Cultivate Administrative Commitment**

An administration that is committed to the concept of faculty development and takes an active role in creating a positive environment for teaching is as crucial as faculty involvement (Eble & McKeachie, 1985; Green, 1990; Sorcinelli & Aitken, 1995). Optimally, the administration provides the budgetary support for the center’s staffing and programs. Additionally, senior academic officers give tremendous credibility and visibility to the program by participating in its activities (e.g., programs, award ceremonies) and by naming these activities as important values of the institution. Stated simply, everyone on cam-
pus might agree that teaching is important, but campus constituencies must also believe that teaching is valued. Key academic officers play a crucial role in indicating the value of teaching.

The development and growth of the center may also hinge on evidence of a strong, credible ally or allies among the senior academic officers. Centers are well served by the support of an institutional administrator who is genuinely interested in faculty development and understands the needs and accomplishments of the center. This individual can serve as a liaison between the chief academic officer, other campus administrators, and the center. On our campus, for example, our deputy provost was an early mentor to the Center for Teaching, seeking opportunities for demonstrating support for initiatives, providing ongoing feedback to the provost and the center, and providing guidance on future program development. In turn, our center gives credit back to advocates in the administration, inviting them to speak, helping them to solve teaching and learning problems in the larger organization, and seeking to acknowledge their influence and express thanks (e.g., a tribute at a dinner, a plaque, flowers).

Centers also can involve chairs and deans in developing and encouraging participation in important programs. For example, some center directors meet with each department chair on an annual basis to assess needs and gather ideas for programs. At our center’s orientation for new faculty, we invite chairs and deans to accompany their new faculty member to a luncheon or reception. In turn, department chairs call on our center to offer customized workshops for departments on topics such as student diversity, teaching technologies, and assessment/learning outcomes (Cook & Sorcinelli, 1999; Sorcinelli, 1999b).

**Principle 5: Develop Guiding Principles, Clear Goals, and Assessment Procedures**

Many directors, after receiving input from the appropriate constituencies, draft a statement expressing their guiding principles or basis for faculty development activities, a definition of faculty or teaching development, and a list of essential goals. Such a statement need not be elaborate, but it is important that the rationale and goals of the center be laid out clearly and communicated regularly to the institution (e.g., through an annual report, a program brochure, a unit plan).

In our center we outlined the following guiding principles:

- Focusing on better learning as well as more effective teaching
- Making sure that the program is voluntary, confidential, and developmental rather than evaluative
- Building a firewall between teaching development work and personnel decision-making processes
- Developing a variety of ways to share the talent, energy, and expertise of our instructors
- Blending campus-wide services with discipline-specific programs for improving teaching
- Increasing communication about teaching and student learning within and between departments and colleges
- Acting as agents for change within the organization in the arenas of teaching and learning, and assuring that the center is not identified as a clinic for sick teachers

The center is similar to a research institute where the best faculty come together for professional opportunities to learn (University of Massachusetts, 1998). This conceptual framework can also help in outlining goals and core activities, guiding budget decisions, and prioritizing the best use of limited resources.

Beyond the guiding principles, the goals of the center need to be discussed and prioritized. It is important not to raise expectations that the teaching center can do anything and everything. Faculty often offer a range of goals that they desire to see in a center. For example, faculty helped generate the following goals at one state university that I recently visited:

- Offer a variety of faculty opportunities for development in teaching to enable student learning.
- Encourage a focus on who our students are, how they learn, and how different teaching approaches can have an impact on their learning.
- Provide opportunities for faculty to come together across disciplines to share their teaching experiences and expertise.
- Provide orientation, mentoring, and instructional support to new and pretenure faculty.
- Provide opportunities for renewal and growth in teaching to senior faculty.
- Support a campus culture of excellence, recognition, and reward for teaching.

These faculty are now sorting and prioritizing these goals, with a focus on where to get started.

Once started, the faculty developer(s) should think about how to assess effectiveness in accomplishing the goals. Aspects to evaluate could include faculty participation, satisfaction, changes in teaching behaviors, student learning outcomes, and changes in the culture for teaching and learning on campus. Assessing the center's impact is important for several reasons. First, assessment demonstrates to developers that we actually do what we say we do. Evaluations of individual consultations and workshops are a great source of in-process feedback. More comprehensive evaluations of programming are something that one might tackle several years down the line. For example, a faculty associate and doctoral student recently helped our center measure, through surveys and in-depth interviews, the decadelong impact of a pretenure teaching fellows program and individual consultations and workshops (Dale, 1998; List, 1997).

A second reason for doing assessment is that it can satisfy the demand for accountability by the central administration. Each year we prepare an annual report that describes our goals, activities, and outcomes (University of Massachusetts, 1998). We mail it to our central administrators, deans, chairs, and faculty involved in our programs. We see our annual report as a way to solicit peer review and feedback. It also keeps assessment in our hands rather than having someone else doing it for or to us.

A third reason for assessment is that it can help departments and programs set goals and measure their effectiveness. The center's annual report can be used as a source of information for departmental and programmatic planning and evaluation.

A final organizational issue to ponder is the actual physical location of the teaching center. Too often, centers for teaching and learning are perceived as helpful but distant, not well known, hard to find, and on the periphery of campus. While space is often tight at most institutions, it is important that the center develop a presence and identity on campus, that it be accessible, and that it be allocated enough space to allow for individual consultation and group seminars. Negotiations about structural issues such as location, funding, and space may not seem imperative, but together they signal the extent to which a campus-wide center is important.
Principle 7: Offer a Range of Opportunities, but Lead with Strengths

Studies show that faculty have different needs at different stages of their careers (Sorcinelli, 1985). In response, it makes sense that your center create programs to address a range of differing needs and encompass as many faculty as possible. Many centers include orientations for teaching assistants and new faculty, early feedback mechanisms for pre-tenure teachers, and mentoring opportunities involving senior faculty.

When asked what issues they would most like the center to tackle, faculty often suggest a wide range of programs. Well-regarded activities include the following:

- Individual, confidential consultation services to allow a faculty member to assess what is going well in terms of teaching and student learning and what might merit attention
- Campus-wide workshops or informal seminars on teaching and learning topics
- Special programs for new and pre-tenure faculty: orientations; mentoring; opportunities to get early, formative, helpful feedback on teaching; and ongoing seminars on teaching
- Special programs to encourage the engagement of senior faculty, such as offering “master teacher” workshops, conducting a set of seminars on teaching and technology, and employing senior colleagues as mentors
- Targeted programs for disciplines, departments, and colleges such as course and program assessment, teaching evaluation (by students, peers, and supervisors), supporting adjunct faculty, and developing leadership skills for department chairs

At the same time, in programs limited by resources, experience suggests that the director would be wise to prioritize commitments carefully, lead with staffing strengths, and insist on quality programming. Credibility with faculty is better fostered by offering a small group of carefully focused, planned, and conducted programs than with a breadth of program offerings which do not maintain distinction.

In fact, I would offer a caution to developers of newly established programs. Do not be dazzled by the number and range of activities an experienced program may offer. At our Center for Teaching, we started with a few projects and spent the next ten years creating a comprehensive program. We now see the need to take stock of each award and opportunity lest we become too stretched—in terms of both staffing and focus. My advice to new developers is to think big but start small.

Principle 8: Encourage Collegiality and Community

Studies confirm that faculty members need each other’s support and that many faculty members express the desire to work with colleagues within and outside their disciplines (Eble & McKeachie, 1985; Sorcinelli, 1985). In fact, getting to know other faculty members and sharing ideas about teaching is frequently described as one of the primary benefits of participation in faculty development programs. Faculty conversations about teaching often provide the means for the individual teacher to adapt an idea or strategy for his or her own course. Faculty members also take cues from each other and are more likely to take advantage of faculty development opportunities if based on the personal recommendation of a colleague. The faculty development center can take an important role in convening faculty members so that such discussions can occur. Even small rewards such as a luncheon or refreshments act as a positive motivation and add greatly to creating a congenial setting.

At many institutions that I visit, faculty suggest that there needs to be more good talk about good teaching on campus and that a center could facilitate such discussion. Again, suggestions center on the notion of tapping into the talent of faculty. As one interviewee observed,

> There are great teachers here who could be called on to lead workshops or informal noon-hour sessions. They could provide advice to and facilitate discussions with special groups such as new faculty, faculty who supervise teaching assistants, faculty who involve undergraduates in research projects, faculty who teach large classes or small seminars, faculty who teach freshmen, or faculty interested in different pedagogies such as changing technologies.
Over time, faculty, as well as deans and chairs, become advocates of the center, urging their colleagues to engage voluntarily in activities that support teaching. Our faculty have developed teaching themes within a department, exchanged syllabi and materials, held brown bag lunches to discuss course designs or teaching methods, and worked with new faculty as mentors. A central goal here is to reduce the isolation in which faculty teach their classes and to provide a means of letting colleagues know about useful innovations.

Principle 9: Create Collaborative Systems of Support

Like most teaching centers, our aspirations to serve and influence the institution will never be matched by our levels of staffing and funding. We decided early on that program initiatives would be better accomplished by joining forces with others rather than working alone. In this way, we are doing what we encourage faculty to do—create communities of support. One of our most successful strategies has been to call not only for the approval, but also for the financial support, of key administrative offices on campus. In other words, we have been able to enhance existing faculty development activities and create new ones through a planned strategy of collaboration—of ideas, staff, resources, and funds—with other campus agencies (e.g., Provost’s Office, Academic Deans’ Council, Writing Program, Office of Academic Computing, Graduate School, Office of Research Affairs, and Office of Academic Planning and Assessment).

One example is our TEACHnology Fellows Program (Shih & Sorcinelli, 2000; Sorcinelli, 1999b). Each year, this fellowship helps ten midcareer and senior faculty apply the capacities of technology to teaching and learning. The year includes a retreat, year-long seminars, consultations, and assessments. We first presented the idea for such a fellowship to our school and college deans, and they agreed to each sponsor one or two fellows by awarding them a high-performance laptop computer. In turn, we agreed to design the program so that it encouraged fellows to return as peer innovators to their home departments and colleges. We then developed partnerships with our Office of Academic Computing and our Center for Computer-Based Instructional Technology. They offered consultation and training not available in the Center for Teaching, and we now work more formally with academic computing to improve teaching technologies on campus. Both the quality of the fellowship and the relationship between our centers have benefited from these partnerships. And much like our other collaborative ventures, this entire fellowship is internally funded—possibly the best indicator of the success of such cooperative alliances.

Principle 10: Provide Measures of Recognition and Rewards

In a number of studies, beyond the specific concerns of faculty members, there is often something vaguely described as a need for recognition and rewards (Eble & McKeachie, 1985; Sorcinelli, 1985). Successful programs use a range of informal and formal means to motivate participation and involvement. Increasingly, faculty with whom I talk give high marks to provisions for class-free time, release time, or other such time-enhancing resources for developing a teaching innovation or for focusing on an especially demanding teaching activity, such as integrating technology into the classroom. Such mechanisms provide faculty with the necessary time for professional development. Others value small teaching grants programs—for books, software, and other teaching materials or travel to a teaching-related conference. Similarly, appreciation and recognition of faculty contributions to the center can be acknowledged through a note, a plaque, a luncheon, a gift certificate for books, or a designation as mentor. These ideas are low cost but high yield in terms of faculty satisfaction. If one were seeking a strategy for faculty development at any institution, such acknowledgment might be a place to begin. It is not, however, the place to end.

CONCLUSION

As the center develops and matures, it can play an important role in creating an institutional structure and culture that values and rewards teaching (Chism, 1998; Sorcinelli & Aitken, 1995). For example, staff in our center now consult on the development of student rating systems and broader teaching evaluation systems, offer programs on the teaching portfolio, help departments design criteria for excellence in teaching, coordinate distinguished teaching awards, and sit on a provost’s task force on faculty roles and rewards. These are all potential ways to make the reward structure more responsive to teaching. We have discovered that getting to this point of influence required our
recognizing from the start the prime importance of identifying support, crossing boundaries, creating linkages, arranging opportunities for collegiality and community, and providing ways for faculty to develop and receive recognition as teachers.

In other words, when starting or sustaining teaching centers, faculty developers need to live according to the ten principles of good practice.

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