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The Roles of Teaching and Learning Centers

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To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming,
is the only end in life.

—Robert Louis Stevenson

This chapter shares findings from a survey of teaching and learning centers on college and university campuses in the United States. Topics addressed include organizational infrastructure, assessment and accountability, factors/challenges contributing to successful implementation, and a list of functions and program offerings found in teaching and learning centers across the country.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, American institutions of higher education have established teaching and learning centers (TLCs) to help faculty members develop, assess, and refine their teaching skills (Epper & Bates, 2001; Sorcinelli, 2002). However, as Bartlett (2002) points out in a *Chronicle* article about the closing of the 30-year-old TLC at the University of Nebraska, budget constraints can leave such centers especially vulnerable. The central questions to be asked are, "What do these centers provide to enhance and improve the teaching climate of their institution?" and "How do they achieve their goals, overcome obstacles, address accountability, and survive in times of budgetary constraints?"

In an effort to address these questions, we sought to identify specific principles, practices, and leadership strategies that would assist in decision-making about developing or enhancing a comprehensive TLC. Wright (2000), in one of the few extant survey research studies of the operation of faculty development centers, found that over 80% of the center directors report to the chief academic officer of the institution. In addition, she reported that almost two-thirds of the 33 campuses she surveyed received their funds from general, instructional, or administrative sources; the remaining third were funded from such external revenue streams as grants, contracts, student fees, gifts, endowment funds, or earned income. The costs for administering these services were quite varied. Wright reported that in the fall of 1997, when her survey was distributed, seven programs reported budgets over \$300,000; six were in the \$150,000–\$299,000 range; four centers ranged between \$75,000 and \$149,000; and the remaining centers had budgets below \$74,000, with six of those below \$24,999.

The range of services was also quite varied. All 33 centers Wright surveyed were engaged in faculty and instructional development activities, including faculty consultation services (100%), resource rooms for faculty (98%), workshops (97%), and newsletters (63%). Other services provided by some of the centers in the survey included instructional technology support (57%), media production facilities (27%), examination services (21%), grant proposal assistance (95%), student learning skills assistance (6%), supplemental instruction learning skills (3%), teaching awards (3%), and multicultural teaching and learning services (3%).

Sorcinelli (2002) distilled 10 principles of good practice for developing and maintaining TLCs predicated on her own experience in developing two centers. She explains, "these principles are not Ten Commandments; they are guidelines for getting started. They 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" (p. 10). The 10 principles of good practice are:

- 1) Build stakeholders by listening to all perspectives.
- 2) Ensure effective program leadership and management.
- 3) Emphasize faculty ownership.
- 4) Cultivate administrative commitment.
- 5) Develop guiding principles, clear goals, and assessment procedures.
- 6) Strategically place the center within the organizational structure.
- 7) Offer a range of opportunities, but lead with strengths.
- 8) Encourage collegiality and community.
- 9) Create collaborative systems of support.
- 10) Provide measures of recognition and rewards. (pp. 10–21).

Although there appears to be a widely disseminated understanding of what teaching and learning centers are, there have been only a handful of studies that have examined the functions of TLCs and other faculty development programs (Centra, 1976; Chambers, 1998; Crawley, 1995; Diamond, 2002; Erickson, 1986; Gullatt & Weaver, 1997; Kalivoda, Broder, & Jackson, 2003; Sorcinelli, 2002). Despite the 10 guiding principles identified by Sorcinelli, campus leaders who wish to establish a center often have specific questions about how to inaugurate and sustain a TLC, particularly when expenses outside of direct instruction come under close scrutiny. This study sought to identify specific practices and programs of successful TLCs as identified by current directors of these centers, particularly best practices that could help others who are seeking to initiate a center, strengthen an existing center, or assist those who are documenting the impact of a center on the campus climate of teaching and learning.

METHODOLOGY

Five members of the American Council on Education (ACE) Fellows program collaborated on a leadership team. Fellows spend a year studying and observing the world of higher education, with a special focus on leadership. Fellows are assigned to leadership teams, in which they complete a major project. They are mentored by one or more senior administrators at a host institution.

The team members identified six areas of interest for a survey regarding faculty development centers.

- The functions or programs offered by each center
- Perceived best practices
- Obstacles to goal attainment
- Organizational or reporting structure
- Accountability measures
- Relationship between the TLC and faculty use of technology

After individually and collectively visiting a number of centers and visiting the websites of many others, our team developed an eight-item survey; one item contained 45 characteristics or offerings to be marked with an X if it applied to the faculty development center or program. With approvals from the Human Subjects Review boards at our institutions, we sent the survey electronically to 260 directors of TLCs during the spring of 2003. The survey was sent primarily to those institutions listed on the University of Kansas web site of TLCs in the United States and Canada, including universities, four-year, and two-year colleges (see <http://www.ku.edu/-cte/resources/websites.html>). The survey was also posted on the listserv of the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (POD), a group with more than 1,000 faculty, administrators, and staff members, primarily in the United States. Although there was potential for duplication, we also posted the survey on the POD listserv of small colleges, as we hoped to elicit responses from smaller institutions that were not on the University of Kansas list, and where faculty may oversee some TLC functions without the presence of an actual center on their campuses.

FINDINGS

Table 5.1 presents the findings from the 109 surveys that were returned electronically. Of the 109 responses, 91 resulted from the 260 direct requests (35%), and 18 resulted from the listserv posting. The table shows the percentage and numbers of responses by institutional type for the various characteristics and offerings of faculty development centers. Of our total 109 responses, we received only two responses from public baccalaureate colleges and only one from a specialized college; thus, those three responses are represented in the total percentages given, but not depicted in the graphs (indicated by an asterisk). To read the graphs, please bear in mind the number and percentage given in parentheses after the item. The graph shows the actual number of responses, segmented by institutional type in this order: 51 public doctoral universities, 13

private doctoral universities, 19 public master's universities, 8 private master's universities, 8 private liberal arts colleges, and 7 public associate's colleges.

TABLE 5.1
Offerings of Teaching and Learning Centers

Note: Table 5.1 designed by Bernadette Howlett, Idaho State University
Instructional Technology Resource Center

In addition, center directors reported offerings and grant opportunities that were not among those we listed. The most common offerings appear below.

Features of Many Centers

- A wide variety of workshops
- Midterm student feedback (SGID)
- Faculty luncheon or dinner discussions
- Videotaping for teaching performance feedback
- Summer faculty development programs
- Support for research on teaching and learning

Features of Some Centers

- Classroom/media equipment loans
- Postdoctoral fellows programs
- Campus reading groups
- Preparing Future Faculty projects
- Evaluation services (grants, curriculum development, program evaluation)
- Assistance with new policy development for technology issues

Grants Offered Through Centers (in addition to technology and course redesign)

- Teaching improvement grants made to teams of faculty and staff
- Departmental learning communities
- Funding for book discussion groups
- Summer research start-up grants for faculty
- Faculty-student research collaboration grants
- Scholarship of teaching, professional development, research initiation grants
- Interdisciplinary or multicultural teaching and curriculum development grants

- Travel grants (usually to teaching and learning conferences or workshops)
- Assessment (for faculty to improve their understanding of assessment)

Best Practices

In addition to learning about the range of programs and practices at various institutions, we were also eager to learn about perceived best practices. We posed the following questions:

- What are best practices of TLCs in the United States as reported by center directors?
- What are strategies that help TLC directors achieve their goals?
- What are the obstacles that inhibit TLCs from achieving their goals?
- What organizational structure or reporting line works best to support and sustain a TLC?

The results are summarized in the following four tables. Table 5.2 presents a summary of the best practices of TLCs as identified by their directors. Response numbers are noted for each major category of response as well as selected examples that illustrate each major category of response. Table 5.3 summarizes the strategies that best help teaching and learning centers achieve their goals. The primary obstacles to achieving their goals are summarized in Table 5.4. Table 5.5 indicates the preferred reporting lines for teaching and learning center directors. It is interesting to note how consistently the responses from TLC directors track with the 10 principles of good practice outlined by Sorcinelli (2002).

TABLE 5.2
Best Practices of Teaching and Learning Centers

Identify one or more of your best practices that have made your teaching and learning center effective.

Offering Workshops (34 responses)

- Lecture series
- Workshops on topics linked to faculty needs
- Lunch discussions and lectures; provide food and refreshments
- Faculty orientations
- TA training workshops (e.g., Preparing Future Faculty workshops)

Providing Faculty Mentoring/Personal Assessment Programs (27 responses)

- Provide clear formative feedback to faculty who request feedback
- Make visits to faculty classes who request visits
- Video faculty classes and provide feedback
- Target mentoring programs (e.g., part time, senior faculty)
- Use peers to assist in providing feedback

Collaborating/Establishing Learning Communities (22 responses)

- Link people from different departments to work on joint projects
- Develop a team approach to faculty development

Adapting/Assessing Needs/Listening (20 responses)

- Distribute campus surveys
- Constantly ask faculty what they want/need
- Listen one-on-one to what faculty express as their needs for the center
- Use focus groups to assess what faculty members value/want/need
- Develop a systematic approach to assessment then implement what faculty want

Being Visible/Accessible (20 responses)

- Have director maintain a high profile on campus
- Make ourselves available for classes
- Provide campus newsletters
- Have staff visit faculty in their offices

Providing Technical Support (20 responses)

- Offer individual technical support
- Help faculty integrate technology and teaching
- Use new digital technology to assist with distance learning and Internet courses

Providing Resources (e.g., stipends, travel funds, release time) (15 responses)

- Provide summer stipends
- Provide release time for faculty teaching development projects
- Fund teaching awards

Establishing a Positive Climate for Teaching/Learning (9 responses)

- Be personally positive and supportive of faculty
- Help faculty manage stress
- Prevent perception of the TLC as remedial training for ineffective teachers

Networking (5 responses)

- Support scholarly circles for networking

Helping Write Grants (5 responses)

- Assist in preparing grant proposals
 - Identify funding sources for faculty members
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TABLE 5.3
Strategies for Achieving the Goals

Identify factors that have helped the teaching and learning center achieve its goals.

Strong Administrative Support (39 responses)

- Positive comments from administration to faculty
- Positive comments from administration to learning center director and staff
- Budget support for faculty fellows program
- Positive leadership from administrators who are actively interested, visible, and engaged in the center

Engaged and Supportive Faculty (28 responses)

- Faculty who recognize the value of what the TLC does
- Faculty who are personally motivated to use our services
- Faculty who have ownership of the programs, instead of a sense that they are having something imposed on them from above

Cultural Tradition of Support and Climate of Collaboration/Cooperation (20 responses)

- Faculty who value teaching
- Hiring practices that stress the value of teaching
- Positive perception of those who use the center, instead of the center as a place where "bad teachers" go to be fixed

Adequate Budget (18 responses)

- Budget support from administration

Skilled and Dedicated Staff Support (16 responses)

- Staff members who go the extra mile to provide support services
- Staff members whom faculty perceive as credible

Grant Funding (8 responses)

- Track record of helping faculty to receive and manage grant resources
- Assistance with grant proposals

Location and Physical Facilities (5 responses)

- Location near faculty members
- Appealing, inviting physical facilities

Strategic Planning and Goal Setting (4 responses)

- Collaborative goal setting
- Systematic assessment of goals

Providing Food and Refreshments (4 responses)

Student Support (3 responses)

TABLE 5.4
Obstacles to Teaching and Learning Centers

Identify one or more obstacles that have hindered the teaching and learning center from achieving its goals.

Budget Constraints and Budget Cuts (38 responses)

- New budget cuts
- Loss of grant support

Faculty Perceptions of a Research Culture Rather Than an Emphasis on Teaching Enhancement (29 responses)

- Faculty belief that research rather than teaching is rewarded
- Lip service given to teaching by administration

Lack of Adequate Staff Support (23 responses)

- Lack of staff
- Cuts in staffing due to budget cuts
- Few faculty volunteers

Lack of Faculty Time to Devote to Development Activities (16 responses)

- Faculty perception that they are too busy teaching to devote time to development
- Pressures for faculty to focus on research—publish or perish

General Lack of Administrative Support (14 responses)

- Lack of public administrative support of our program
- Lack of private, personal administrative support of our program
- Changing administrators or administrators with a short memory who do not honor their previous commitments

General Lack of Faculty Support and Interest; Faculty Inertia (12 responses)

- Faculty without a history of coming to the center
- Faculty concerns about confidentiality
- Lack of perceived connections between using the center and enhancing careers

Facility Problems: Poor Location or Lack of Space (9 responses)

TABLE 5.5
Recommended Teaching and Learning Center Reporting Line

What is the best organizational or reporting structure for a teaching and learning center director?

Report to Provost or Vice President for Academic Affairs or Chief Academic Officer (84 responses)

- Have regular meetings with the chief academic officer

Report to Vice Provost or Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs (6 responses)

Dean (5 responses)

It Depends (5 responses)

- Need for each campus to determine the best reporting line in that institution
- "Reporting" may not be the best term; the center should belong to the campus

Faculty Governing Board (1 response)

Technology

Because technology is such an important part of teaching and learning in a digital age, we were also interested in learning about the relationships between TLCs and technology. In Table 5.1, the IT support graphs show the numbers of institutions with technology as part of the faculty development center (49) and as a separate center (64). What the graph does not show is that there were 16 (15%) institutions that marked IT support as *both* part of the center *and* as a separate center, and 12 (11%) institutions marked neither. There were 12 (11%) institutions that sponsor a "faculty-in-residence for technology" position, and 56 (51%) provide specific teaching with technology faculty development grants. It is clear that technology currently plays a major role in faculty development at most institutions. The nature and level of the support for technology varies, but the important advice/patterns appeared in responses to this survey item: "If technology instruction is included in your Center's mission, please describe the nature of the technological support that you provide." Table 2.6 summarizes the various responses. One important perspective that emerged in various forms is that technology is perceived as a means to initiate discussion about teaching. It attracts faculty to sessions. Technology appears to be a carrot that helps to begin a conversation on teaching with technology, but leads to deeper issues and programs on pedagogy as it relates to faculty development.

TABLE 5.6
Responses on Teaching and Learning Centers and Technology

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- Centers, even as they may teach faculty about emerging technology, emphasize pedagogy and how learning can be enhanced by technology.
 - Faculty developers assist with online course or electronic classroom management tools.
 - Support can include administrative costs (e.g., finance, payroll), research, technology that accompanies textbooks, distance education, software (e.g., for presentations, graphics) and hardware (e.g., scanners, CD burners).
 - Methods of delivery include workshops (single or a series, some faculty-led, some led by professional staff), institutes, labs, equipment loan, one-on-one, hands-on, and studio demonstrations.
 - Consultation can be provided in the form of a helpdesk, faculty fellowships, department workshops, or online (email or web based). Consultations may include advice about hardware/software purchases.
 - Rewards/incentives can include arranging for workshop advertising, computer replacement linked to workshop attendance, professional leave salary enhancements, release time, travel to conferences on utilizing new technology, summer stipends, and software purchases or awards.
 - Support staff includes faculty experts, instructional technology specialists, web/video developers for online courses, student technical consultants, just-in-time teaching, and instructional design consultants.
 - Centers collaborate often with other campus resources and departments, especially separate technology support centers.
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Accountability

Our questions about accountability may point to a significant need as many centers may find themselves in a position of justifying the investment of their expenses. Although many colleges and universities have established teaching and learning centers, only 21 of the 109 survey respondents reported any information about their accountability practices.

No clear pattern emerged from the findings, possibly due to the low response rate. Those who reported assessing their own effectiveness use a variety of practices, ranging from workshop evaluations to soliciting feedback through focus groups. Table 7 lists responses in four categories: accountability practices, frequency of review/analysis, individuals responsible for the accountability practices, and recipient(s) of accountability findings.

TABLE 5.7
Responses on Accountability in the Teaching and Learning Center

Accountability Practices

- Workshop evaluations
- Workshop learning assessments
- Satisfaction/value surveys
- Number of workshop participants
- Number of subscribers to newsletter
- Frequency of contacts with faculty
- Periodic interviews
- Focus groups
- Formal review by ACE Fellow
- Institutional needs assessments
- Strategic planning and program review

Frequency of Review/Analysis

- By Term
- Annually

Individuals Responsible for the Accountability Practices

- Center staff
- Center director
- Center director and designated staff members
- Advisory board members
- Full-time evaluator on staff
- Provost's office staff
- Advisory board subcommittee
- Council on teaching (appointed faculty members who report to the provost)
- Each workshop participant collects own data (never asked by administration for a report)

Recipient(s) of Accountability Findings

- Provost
 - Center's advisory council
 - Information systems and college development (a separate department within the university)
 - President's cabinet following review by advisory committee
 - Dean of the college
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With respect to accountability, the availability of resources, coupled with the mission and the predisposition of the institution's leaders toward accountability within each institution, will, more than likely, dictate the extent of accountability measures implemented. Some parameters for consideration to ensure best practices regarding accountability address four key areas including leadership, process, communication, and funding. The leadership of a designated "chief worrier" (likely the TLC director) is needed to drive the data collection, analysis, and reporting. This individual is central to overseeing a process that employs qualitative and quantitative processes using multiple measures to yield formative and summative data, as well as the development of an evaluation cycle that is in harmony with the institution's academic assessment and strategic planning cycles. Also needed is communication of the accountability practices and the findings via the faculty development web site to ensure that the appropriate constituencies are continuously informed of the efficacy of the faculty development initiatives. Finally, adequate funding will provide the necessary leverage to effectively implement a sound accountability plan.

Striking a balance between a comprehensive accountability plan that is informative and instructive, yet not cumbersome, is a challenge faced by all institutions regardless of size and mission. Perhaps a guiding principle to keep in mind as we work toward resolving that tension lies in the words of Moliere, "It is not only for what we do that we are held responsible, but also for what we do not do."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey responses and our contacts with other centers lead us to eight distinct recommendations for those who are considering developing, expanding, or changing TLCs.

- The range of services provided by a TLC should be aligned with institutional mission and conceptions of faculty work. Expectations of faculty that are most important in serving the mission should be the highest priorities for the TLC.
- Administrative support for centers should include not only financial and human resources but also advocacy for the center's function in promoting high standards for teaching and learning at an institution. If administrators attend or introduce workshop sessions at least occasionally, this sends a strong message to faculty.

- If a center is intended to serve as a resource for all faculty and a means of making the teaching mission visible, administrators should be cautious about using a center as a clearinghouse for responsibilities that may have no other home (such as assessment, graduate research assistant training, or administration of course evaluations). These responsibilities are possible if the staffing and budget are sufficient; otherwise, they will detract from the core faculty development purpose of the TLC.
- Administrators should work with center directors and faculty leaders to promote the perception of the center as a site of inquiry about learning, not primarily a source of remediation for faculty who are having difficulties in the classroom. When a faculty member does receive needed assistance with teaching, the TLC ought to be known as a place where confidentiality is assured.
- Although many of the topics and services that draw faculty into a center address practical concerns of their professional lives—promotion/tenure issues, classroom management, use of instructional media and technology. Administrators should encourage the center to offer programs that also address the ways faculty can meet the learning needs of undergraduate and graduate students. Examples include learning communities, student use of technology, and diverse learning styles.
- Administrators should support center directors as they experiment with new programs that address changing ideas about students, learning, and faculty work.
- Administrators should support efforts to use emerging technology as a resource in all faculty and staff development initiatives, including a TLC. A key phrase faculty often state is the desire to learn “appropriate use of technology.”
- Administrators should encourage and rely upon varied means of communicating with those within and outside the institution—newsletters, web sites, and discussions—to advertise and recognize the activities a center offers in support of the teaching mission.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this survey research was to learn the range and varieties of offerings at TLCs, their perceived best practices, strategies for and obstacles to achievement of goals, accountability practices, and reporting lines. We consider

future research questions that delve deeper into the areas we have touched upon to be of value. One such area is how small institutions approach faculty development when they do not have formal centers. Another area is the use of technology for delivering faculty development programs. We heard about institutions that are beginning to offer online faculty development and use their web sites to archive programs. This area needs especially careful analysis. Finally, it would serve TLC directors well to know how others are addressing the serious issue of assessment in a time of budget cuts. It is interesting to note that of 80 TLCs that reported involvement in assessment at the course and/or institutional level, only 21 of them reported any assessment or accountability measures of their own operations. Why is this? Are there star assessment programs in place? If so, what do their assessment plans entail? Information about best practices in assessment could be valuable to any center that needs to collect data that demonstrate its effectiveness. By the time the center's budget is being cut, it is too late to initiate an assessment plan. We do not wish to read about a repeat of the Nebraska experience in the *Chronicle*.

NOTE

Requests for copies of the survey may be directed to Alan Frantz at franalan@isu.edu.

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