6

Finding Key Faculty to Influence Change

Joan K. Middendorf
Indiana University

To succeed in getting faculty to accept new teaching approaches, academic support professionals can benefit from the literature on planned change. By understanding the different rates at which faculty accept change, we can also identify the faculty most likely to lead their colleagues to accepting new approaches. Opinion leaders can offer insight into faculty reactions to new approaches; their involvement in project planning can influence acceptance. Innovators, when selected carefully, can demonstrate and test new teaching approaches. Knowledge of when and how to involve these two kinds of faculty can reduce frustration and enhance efforts to spread new ideas about teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Faculty are hired and promoted because they are committed experts in one or more specific academic disciplines. When we—as academic support professionals—work with faculty to improve their teaching, we are not asking them to give up their areas of expertise but rather to value and acquire expertise in a new area—that of teaching and learning. For faculty, this often represents a significant change. A small group of faculty seem to embrace new teaching approaches readily. Others resist new approaches and criticize their more innovative colleagues. This situation can frustrate academic support professionals, who so often work through and with faculty in making presentations, writing grants, and designing projects to enhance undergraduate education. Why are some faculty eager for change while others oppose it?

To facilitate changes regarding teaching, academic support professionals may have to expand their own expertise. They need expertise not

only in such areas as instructional development, evaluation, and group process, but also in the area of planned change. Fortunately, a literature of planned change exists and can offer useful principles, as well as an increased chance of success. Havelock's (1995) work is based on diffusion research in education. Rogers' (1995) work is based on diffusion in many fields including education. Dormant's (1999) work is based primarily on corporate training and performance technology. We can apply their useful principles to a higher education setting for an increased chance of success.

This article focuses on two groups of faculty who can lend invaluable support to change efforts—the Opinion Leaders and the Acceptable Innovators. In order to better identify these key faculty, academic support professionals need to understand the overall pattern and rate of acceptance of change within a group.

RATE-OF-ACCEPTANCE CATEGORIES

Not all faculty accept a change at the same rate. Some faculty are more receptive to change and accept it faster than others. Some are quite slow to accept change. Rogers (1995) notes that it is common for the rate-of-acceptance pattern to fall into a normal distribution (see Figure 6.1). Innovators accept first. Early Acceptors follow soon after. As the Majority see those who accept early, they follow along. Finally, Latecomers are extremely reticent to accept change.

By analyzing the faculty group according to rate-of-acceptance, academic support professionals can assign priorities and allocate resources most effectively. For example, if we assume that a new approach offers a good and useful change, and we introduce that change reasonably well and provide follow-up support, we can more or less count on acceptance from the first two groups—Innovators and Early Acceptors. At the other end of the curve, regardless of what we do, the Latecomers may take forever to embrace the change despite our efforts and those of our colleagues. Therefore, for different reasons—the early groups are relatively easy to influence, the last group is difficult and can consume resources without much payoff—we should probably not spend much of our limited resources on this 32% (with the exception of a few key faculty whom we will discuss below). However, by examining Innovators and Early Acceptors more carefully, we can identify the Opinion Leaders and Acceptable Innovators, two sub-groups who can influence the willing-

FIGURE 6.1
Rate-of-Acceptance Categories

Adapted from Rogers, 1995

ness of the Majority to accept change. (A previous article, Middendorf, 1998, described specific steps to take for encouraging the Majority to accept a change.)

OPINION LEADERS

Opinion Leaders (Rogers, 1995) are found among the Early Acceptors. They are the most important faculty in facilitating a change regarding teaching because, even though they usually have no official position of power, they do have considerable influence over others' attitudes and behaviors. They serve as the hub of the faculty communication network. They make careful judgments and good decisions, and they decrease uncertainty because their peers trust their evaluation. For example, Professor D recently received a Fulbright Fellowship and has a good reputation for the large, introductory courses he teaches. In addition, he is described by a colleague as "a straight shooter—if he tells you something he'll do it. Also, he doesn't have hidden agendas and he's not self-aggrandizing. He doesn't speak much at faculty meetings, but when he does, he pursues his principles with persistence. Over the years he's gained our respect and we've learned to listen to him."

Faculty members who can maintain the role of Opinion Leaders

FIGURE 6.2
Rates of Acceptance and Two Key Faculty Groups

Adapted from Rogers, 1995

tend to reject an innovation that in their minds is likely to fail and to champion an innovation whose time they feel has come. When they can be brought aboard, they are natural “missionaries” for influencing others to accept new approaches to teaching.

Opinion Leaders . . .

are neither the first nor the last to make a change;
have influence within the faculty;
represent the norms of the faculty group;
are at the hub of the faculty communications network;
observe Innovators to see how an idea works or where the dangers lie;
observe Latecomers to learn about an idea’s limitations;
are relied on by the group for good judgment; and
tend to be asked to serve on many committees.

They can help if you . . .

use them sparingly;
interview them to learn their attitude toward the innovation; and
involve them in planning for the implementation.

How to Identify Opinion Leaders

If you have little past experience with a faculty group, you may need to invest considerable time and effort in order to understand individuals and their relationship within the group. One way to do this is to interview members of the group. Even such simple questions as, *When you have a question about new instructional technology, whom do you consult within the department?* or, *When you have a problem grading students, to whom do you turn?* can help you identify potential leaders for your change project.

For example, in the Freshman Learning Project on the Indiana University campus, a small, interdisciplinary group of faculty were selected for a team that would examine the difficulties of teaching large, introductory classes, attempt to better understand first-year students, and implement active learning strategies to increase the quantity and quality of student thinking. Our ultimate goal was to affect not only the faculty directly involved in this project but their departmental colleagues as well. Therefore, we started with faculty who could act as Opinion Leaders within their departments. To identify likely faculty from each of eight departments, we developed a set of criteria. For our project, the potential Opinion Leader must

- Be tenured
- Teach large, introductory classes
- Be open to new ideas, though not famed for good teaching
- Be respected by colleagues (i.e., reputation as a researcher)
- Not be considered a maverick

The first three criteria are related specifically to the Freshman Learning Project. Other projects would have different criteria. The last two criteria, however, should be on the list for any change effort. When selecting faculty members to become advocates for a change, we need to be sure they already have the respect of their colleagues and are not—perhaps just because they are innovative in their teaching—considered mavericks or oddballs.

Once our criteria were clear, we asked three faculty members from each department, either in person or on the phone depending on how well-acquainted we were with them, to suggest three of their peers who met the criteria. When all three named the same person, we viewed that faculty member as an ideal Opinion Leader. In one department, when all three named different people, we went back to a very senior faculty

member in the department and confidentially asked him to rank the list according to the criteria. In another department, when all the names differed, our follow-up indicated that not only was there no likely Opinion Leader, but the department was significantly lacking in cohesion. We chose not to work with that department. In this selection process we avoided getting advice from department chairs because they tend to ignore stated criteria and select faculty members for their own reasons. This method takes a great deal of initial time, but it has long-term benefits that make it worthwhile.

Once identified, how should Opinion Leaders be used?

1) Use them sparingly and efficiently. Because they tend to be sought after for all kinds of committees and projects, they may suffer from overload or overexposure.

2) Involve them as information sources. Since they represent the norms of the group, they have information about the needs of their colleagues. Interview them to find out their initial reactions to the change. If they have questions or concerns about it, we can be sure that other faculty will as well. Their reactions and responses to the change can help us identify the information we need to provide to the department and what concerns to address.

3) Involve them in planning for implementation. If they believe in the change, they can help with grant writing, planning, presentations, and discussions related to the change. Through their advocacy, we can avoid the “not-invented-here” effect (Dormant, 1999).

When Opinion Leaders Oppose Your Project

Academic support professionals face a difficult scenario when faculty who are Opinion Leaders actively oppose new teaching approaches. It can be very difficult to get faculty to change without the buy-in of the Opinion Leaders. Their open resistance can effectively block a change. To avoid this situation the academic support professional should contact the Opinion Leaders early in a project and seek their input in planning. If they demean the change, then we may need to view them as individual change projects and proceed accordingly to develop a step-by-step plan to facilitate their acceptance of the change. (See Middendorf, 1998, for a description of the stages of change and actions to take.) Granted, this entails a great deal of time and effort, but the nay-saying of those held in high regard must be defused early in order to reduce their negative impact on others. Another possibility to consider is that Opinion Lead-

ers have a valid point, and we may have to reassess whether the innovation is worthwhile.

ACCEPTABLE INNOVATORS

In selecting faculty for project advocacy, academic support professionals are often tempted to choose faculty who are working at the cutting edge of new technologies of teaching and learning. For example, Professor E might seem like a good candidate for an Opinion Leader. He works hard on his teaching of undergraduate political science classes, constantly revising his approach. He has instituted permanent collaborative learning groups, online quizzes, an electronic class discussion list, a web page, and group quizzes. Furthermore, he is eager to be of service to the academic support staff. Or, Professor M might be chosen. She has a national reputation for her expertise on teaching in the sciences. She travels widely, both to attend conferences on college teaching and to present workshops at other sites. She has regularly attended campus teaching workshops and has published an article about student thinking. She, too, is delighted to discuss instructional issues with academic support staff.

Professors E and M sound like ideal Opinion Leaders: They are outstanding teachers, interested in pedagogy, and accessible to academic support professionals. However, how these two relate to students or to academic support professionals is not the issue. In the role of Opinion Leaders, the issue is how they relate to their departmental colleagues. Looking further, we find that Professor E's colleagues speak derogatorily of his teaching behind his back—to each other and to administrators. ("If he knew how to teach, he wouldn't always be trying something new.") As for Professor M, her colleagues find her expertise to be off-putting and they strongly resent her. ("I've been teaching for 15 years and she had the nerve to tell me I ought to change the way I do things.") Some of the faculty who are most knowledgeable about innovations are unacceptable as models for their peers.

These two faculty members have been wrongly identified as Opinion Leaders, when they should have been identified as Innovators. While Innovators are also valuable in facilitating changes in teaching, they have different characteristics from the Opinion Leaders, and they serve a different role. Innovators are the venturesome faculty who tend to be the first to adopt new teaching approaches. They are important because they have information sources through which they learn about teaching

innovations. For example, they may read journals or join email distribution lists concerned with college teaching or instructional computing. This interest leads them to frequent communication with people outside their local departments. (This outside group forms a sort of "clique" of Innovators.) Not only do Innovators learn about new teaching methods, they even try them out, which results in teaching-learning failures as well as successes.

Innovators. . .

are first to accept a change;
are willing to take risks;
have information sources outside their local group;
communicate with other Innovators; and
may be viewed as oddballs.

They can help if you . . .

use them for pilot testing, or
have them demonstrate new techniques.

While faculty Innovators may bring new ideas to the group, the very things that make them innovative (e.g., information from outside their department and trying non-traditional approaches) may make them somewhat suspect to their colleagues who tend to read discipline-specific journals and develop relationships only with colleagues in their discipline. In our workshops, some participants have even called Innovators "radicals," "red-hots," or "usual suspects." Academic support professionals can help Innovators understand the negative reactions they encounter by explaining the nature of the reaction: that their advocacy for new teaching approaches may seem odd, even threatening, to their colleagues. We can encourage Innovators to show empathy for their slower-to-innovate colleagues. Innovators who are overly enthusiastic about some cutting-edge technology may sound to the faculty majority like used-car dealers and in the process turn off more people than they inspire.

However, if Innovators are carefully and appropriately involved, they can be valuable assets in a change project. How can they best be involved?

1) As demonstrators of a new technology or approach. This strategy is especially effective when faculty have asked for help. For example, if a faculty member expresses interest in collaborative learning teams,

academic support professionals can suggest that they observe an Innovator—preferably from another department or university—who has effectively designed his or her teaching around student collaboration.

2) As pilot testers. Since they are risk-takers, they are probably willing to experiment with new approaches others might hesitate to try. For example, we asked some Innovators to test several software packages for electronic class discussions. They were able to critique the software and to work out some of the problems before the program was disseminated to the rest of the faculty. Their input saved us valuable time and prevented mistakes that may have resulted in negative reactions to the software.

RETURN OF INVESTMENT

Academic support professionals, like almost everyone else in higher education, never have all the resources that they need. How, then, can we allocate limited resources to achieve the greatest payoff? It may help to think of the situation as a two-by-two matrix—investment of resources vs. payoff (Figure 6.3).

Cell 1 represents the biggest payoff from the smallest investment. Opinion Leaders who tend to be positive toward new teaching approaches require a low investment of resources and yet result in a high payoff, since they will lead others to accept the change.

Cell 2 also represents a big payoff, but it requires a big investment. If we can work with negative Opinion Leaders and overcome their

FIGURE 6.3
Contingency Framework for Investment of Resources

		Investment of Resources	
		Small	Big
Payoff	Big	<i>cell 1</i> Positive Opinion Leaders	<i>cell 2</i> Negative Opinion Leaders
	Small	<i>cell 3</i> Innovators	<i>cell 4</i> Latecomers

resistance, the payoff can be great. Moreover, they may significantly impede the process if we do not convert them. It may take a great amount of time and energy to win them over, but the payoff may be worth the investment.

Cell 3 represents a small payoff for a small investment. Innovators are quick to accept new teaching practices, but they may have limited influence on others.

Cell 4 represents a small payoff for a big investment. Latecomers can consume enormous amounts of resources with little or no results. We can't win everyone over—we can't get everyone to buy into new teaching approaches. With limited time and money, it is important to put our effort where it counts.

CONCLUSION

By understanding the different rates at which faculty accept change, we can also identify the faculty most likely to lead their colleagues to adopt new teaching approaches. Opinion Leaders can inform us of reactions to new approaches and concerns that need to be addressed. Their involvement in planning projects can enhance the acceptance by other faculty of new approaches. Innovators, when selected carefully, can demonstrate and test new teaching approaches. Knowledge of when and how to involve these two kinds of faculty can enhance efforts to spread new ideas about teaching, reduce frustration, and increase chances of project success.

The following questions should help academic support professionals as they begin planning change efforts.

- 1) What criteria should you use to select Opinion Leaders for your change project?
- 2) Who are potential Opinion Leaders for your group?
- 3) How will you gain the participation of Opinion Leaders and involve them in the project?
- 4) Are there Opinion Leaders who may be opposed to your project? What will you do about them?
- 5) Who are likely Innovators for your change project?
- 6) How will you involve them?

REFERENCES

- Dormant, D. (1999). Implementing human performance technology in organizations. In H. Stolovitch & E. Keeps (Eds.), *Handbook of human performance technology* (pp. 237-259). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Havelock, R. G., with Zlotolow, S. (1995). *The change agent's guide* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.
- Middendorf, J. K. (1998). A case study in getting faculty to change. *To Improve the Academy*, 17, 203-224.
- Rogers, E. M. (1995). *Diffusion of innovations* (4th ed.). New York, NY: The Free Press.

Contact:

Joan K. Middendorf
Director, Teaching Resources Center
Ballantine Hall, Room 132
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405-6601
(812) 855-2635
(812) 855-6410 (FAX)
middendo@indiana.edu

Joan K. Middendorf has been the Director of the Teaching Resources Center of the College of Arts and Sciences at Indiana University for a decade. She collaborates with faculty, instructors, and administrators to diffuse pedagogical innovations. In addition, she co-directs the Freshman Learning Project. As the designer of The Change Mappings™ Workshop, she has presented on leading change at more than 20 corporations. She publishes about college teaching and change in higher education. She studies T'ai Chi for relaxation and as an exercise in learning.