



Centers for teaching and learning serve as hub for improving teaching practices

Submitted by Mark Lieberman on February 28, 2018 - 3:00am

When Jason Rhode began working at Northern Illinois University's Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center more than a decade ago, his team's primary mission was to introduce faculty members to new technology they could only get through the institution. Among other efforts, the center held a Teaching With Technology Institute at the end of each academic year to let instructors test new tools.

Attendance was strong at first but steadily declined; no such event is planned for this summer. Instead, the institution will hold a symposium for online teaching -- evidence, Rhode says, of a broader philosophical evolution.

"The days where we were really concerned about how we were equipping computer labs, setting up small classrooms, are probably over," Rhode said. "It seems like there's less introducing of brand-new technology in teaching and learning, as opposed to really thinking more about how do you teach well with it."

Centers like Rhode's -- often with names like "center for teaching and learning" or "center for faculty development" -- increasingly serve as hubs of pedagogical innovation, influenced by but not dependent on flashy digital technology. They allow instructors to ponder new teaching approaches and experiment with new formats. Institutions also position centers to disseminate campuswide strategies and to actively pursue and encourage projects that improve classroom experiences for students.

Many centers represent amalgamations of previously separate campus units. Staff sizes are typically small and funding can be tight. Strong relationships and collaboration with other departments are essential, as is a solid connection to the institution's overall mission.

"They offer space for cross-campus discussions. Perhaps they offer grants or other new incentives," said Mary Wright, director of the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning at Brown University. "They may know champions who can help tell their story about using a digital learning tool in the classroom. Centers can do work as key partners in supporting change around technology."

Combining Forces and Refining Missions

Most center directors interviewed for this article said their organization's focus has shifted since its inception -- or that the current center combines the tasks of two or even three formerly separate teams. Adaptability and flexibility keep successful centers abreast of constantly shifting priorities for instructors.

The degree to which centers try to drive innovation and new approaches depends on the temperament of the faculty. Newly established centers need time to establish relationships with academic departments and offer services that address their concerns. Over time, instructors learn to come to the center when they have questions about technology or pedagogy. Most centers concentrate on providing a wide range of solutions and offering faculty members the tools they need to improve classes as they see fit.

"A key principle for many centers for teaching and learning is to be responsive to institutional goals and priorities, and to work in collaboration with faculty and academic units, guided by their learning goals," Wright said. "However, responsiveness should not be read as mere reaction. Instead, centers express leadership and innovation in how best to support strategic initiatives, and a key competency of the director role is serving as an effective change agent."

Boston College's Center for Teaching Excellence was formed in fall 2014 out of two existing organizations on campus: Instructional Design and E-Teaching Services (IDeS), which supported academic classroom technologies like the learning management system and lecture capture; and the Connors Family Learning Center, which focused on student learning and faculty development. When the center opened in 2014, it absorbed everything from those two organizations but the parts that dealt with student learning, which remained with the Connors Family Learning Center.

"What had been a center that supported technology and teaching became a center that supported pedagogical interests more generally, including technology," said John Rakestraw, director of Boston's Center for Teaching Excellence.

The goal of these changes, according to Rakestraw, was to centralize the institution's commitment to helping faculty improve pedagogy and acknowledge that technology is but one piece of that puzzle.

The center's scope is vast: programming events around course development for faculty members, organizing reading groups among various campus stakeholders, helping with efforts to improve accessibility of course materials, establishing faculty cohorts focused on technology. Its goals are unified by a common principle.

Further Reading

A 2017 [research study](#) ^[1] published by three professors examined the transformation in attitude and structure that dozens of centers have undergone in the last decade. Key findings include that nearly half of centers are engaged in instructional technology and distance learning, and that campus buy-in is an essential component for a center's growth.

"We are the organization on campus that is constituted by the question: How do we teach better and how do we develop better reflections on pedagogical practices?" Rakestraw said.

That can mean helping instructors overcome resistance to technology -- or steering them away from overemphasizing technology interests.

"Some faculty are fascinated by the use of the technology and they want to play with this toy. They're drawn into it by what they see as the possibilities of the technology rather than by the possibilities of the pedagogy that could be enabled by technology," Rakestraw said. "We move pretty quickly to the question, what is it you want students to do?"

A similar fusion took place at the University of California, Davis, a couple years ago, when the center for excellence in teaching (itself a derivative of the former teaching resource center) joined forces with an organization called I Am STEM. The former center was built around faculty members taking initiative to improve their courses; the latter emphasized a more active approach to tackling classroom issues -- identifying trends of classroom struggles across departments and disciplines, and meeting them with proposed solutions.

The end result is the Center for Institutional Effectiveness, which allows faculty members to seek consultations and conducts student analytics research of its own. Marco Molinaro, assistant vice provost for educational effectiveness and the center's director, pointed to its broad view of campus academics as its calling card.

"We have great strength in being able to, in a sense, find patterns in how students are doing that you don't really see unless you look at broad swaths across departments of what students are experiencing," Molinaro said. "We can look at all introductory STEM courses or all courses students tend to experience in their first year, and see patterns among them."

Change and adaptability are key to a center's longevity. At Brown, Wright's center a few years ago concentrated on creating massive open online courses, following a directive from institutional leadership that led Brown to become one of the earliest adopters of Coursera. As the MOOC craze has settled down, so has the center's responsibility to create them. Wright believes centers should adapt to the priorities of present circumstances.

"The best model is one that is in alignment with institutional priorities, always working with collaboration with key partners in digital learning," Wright said.

Finding New Ways to Engage Instructors

The goal for any center for teaching and learning is to get faculty members thinking about improving their classes -- or in some cases, to meet faculty's hunger for innovations they commence of their own accord. Approaches vary depending on institutions' strengths and personality traits.

When Dixie State University, a public institution in Utah with 9,000 students, created its Center for Teaching and Learning in 2014, its founding director, Bruce Harris, conducted a faculty survey to determine the range of teaching styles in use. The results were more dispiriting than he anticipated: 75 percent of instructors reported using a traditional lecture-based, teacher-centered approach. Harris hoped to decrease that figure by at least 10 percentage points.

Those efforts took several different forms. At first, Harris focused on "pushing new technologies and training faculty how to use those technologies, isolated from promoting active learning." Now the approach, like at other centers interviewed for this article, is to help develop learning modules for flipped classrooms through face-to-face workshops and online tools.

It's not always easy, though. "The biggest challenge is we're a supportive unit. We don't have any direct line authority or supervision," Harris said. "If they don't want to be motivated, there's not much we can do."

Jean Florman, director of the University of Iowa's Center for Teaching, thinks her team has found some ways. The Learning Design Collaboratory -- created by the institution's Office of Teaching, Learning & Technology, which includes the center and three other units -- creates communities of practice for faculty members to work together on redesigning courses and thinking through strategies. Training sessions for the institution's TILE initiative (Transform, Interact, Learn, Engage) serve a similar function.

When the center launched, Florman and others predicted that its audience of early adopters would eventually plateau, with the majority of instructors resisting efforts to alter their approaches. Instead, a steady stream of instructors has expressed interest, with more than 500 signing up for TILE training sessions.

Florman attributes her center's success to long-term planning and engagement with administrators on fitting into the university's strategic plan and campus culture. "We're all basically pragmatists," Florman said.

Challenges, Now and Forthcoming

Asking directors of centers for teaching and learning about challenges they face yields some familiar responses.

Everyone wants a bigger staff -- most interviewed for this article have between four and six full-time employees, and some employ graduate students part-time for additional help.

Everyone wants more funding. Jason Rhode at Northern Illinois said his center's operating budget has remained stagnant since 1998; the center relies mainly on external grants.

Here's what else makes directors' jobs harder:

- **Mission creep.** Some faculty members at Boston College have been so pleased with the center's assistance that administrators want to get in on the action as well, according to John Rakestraw. "Given the nature of distributed work on this campus, we sometimes struggle with conversations going on at different places."
- **Overcoming reputation for remediation.** In general, according to Mary Wright from Brown, centers for teaching and learning no longer focus primarily on helping instructors who have been deemed ineffective, either by student evaluations or their own estimation. Rather, they want to help faculty members expand their definition of good teaching. That transition is slowly taking hold, she said.
- **Specializing and diversifying.** Smaller institutions struggle to justify resources for focused programming, like a workshop specifically on using the learning management system or operating an online grade book. "We wouldn't get enough people at those very specialized offerings to make it worth doing that," said Cassandra Horii, director of California Institute of Technology's Center for Teaching, Learning and Outreach. At Dixie State, meanwhile, Bruce Harris wants to incorporate more virtual and augmented reality into the learning experience, but such experimentation is too costly right now.
- **Faculty buy-in.** Even at a time when faculty members are more aware than ever that their practices need to undergo change, holdouts remain. At the University of California, Davis, Marco Molinaro said he faces an "uphill battle" navigating a faculty-run culture that is only slowly adapting to the new reality.

Directors of these centers remain optimistic and ambitious about the possibility for more significant developments in teaching innovation. Learning analytics are a major area of focus for directors, though Florman cautions against becoming too wedded to the term "data driven."

"We should always start with a question, a position of inquiry," Florman said. "How can data inform that?"

Some things won't change, though.

"Good teaching is good teaching, no matter what the delivery mode is," Rhode said. "We're not seen as an auxiliary group, but really this is core to the institution and moving forward."