

Suffolk University

Boston, MA

Faculty and Professional Learning Communities

\$107,200 over three years

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*A faculty development program that supports research on student learning and interdisciplinary collaboration throughout the lifecycle of *Charting the Future: A Plan for Suffolk University*.*

Introduction

The Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) at Suffolk University was founded in 2006 and has experienced steady growth over the past six years. This growth led to the addition of a staff member in 2011 that increased the CTE to a three-person office with two faculty developers and a program coordinator. In addition to facilitating campus-wide workshops, multi-day course design institutes, and teaching appreciation events, the CTE also provides individual teaching consultations, student feedback gathering services, and classroom observations. A foundational component of the CTE's mission is to increase student learning through the dissemination of pedagogical information and methodologies, and by supporting interaction among members of the academic community that promotes the sharing of best teaching practices.

Two of the most highly-attended programs facilitated by the CTE are a multi-day Course Design Institute (CDI) and weekly Faculty Writing Groups. Both programs run throughout the academic year and in the summer. Each of these programs follows a learning community model in which participants come together in multi-disciplinary groups to learn and develop their skills over a sustained period of time. We believe the enthusiasm for these programs, evidenced through consistent high attendance and positive program evaluations, illustrates the increasing need at our institution for additional opportunities for faculty and other university professional staff to intentionally develop their skills through programs that are continuous, collaborative, and that foster pedagogical change.

Description of Project and Project Purpose

The CTE is creating a new program for Faculty and Professional Learning Communities (FPLCs) to be launched in spring 2013. Similar to Faculty Learning Communities that were developed in earnest in the 1990s, we envision FPLCs as structured communities that offer the space for 8-10 cross-disciplinary faculty members, staff, and/or administrators to engage in active and collaborative conversations around teaching and learning. The FPLC program is particularly timely because it will be launched alongside and in support of the efforts of a university-wide Strategic Plan, *Charting the Future: A Plan for Suffolk University*, which begins in fall 2012. Indeed, the FPLC program was designed as an institutional mechanism to support the curricular objectives in the Strategic Plan for undergraduate education such as the implementation of hybrid teaching and learning models, an increase in students' multi-cultural competencies, and the encouragement of our students as entrepreneurs and innovative thinkers. FPLCs will provide the support and motivation for members of the Suffolk community to research recent trends in these areas, to implement these and other new teaching strategies in their classrooms, and to measure the impact of these new strategies on student learning.

We chose the FPLC model because the past twenty years of literature on Faculty Learning Communities has shown wide-ranging benefits for institutions. As we assist in the implementation of a new Strategic Plan, we believe FPLCs will help increase institutional commitment among faculty (Cox 2001), improve faculty retention (Cox 1995), and strengthen the Strategic Plan's pedagogical and curricular objectives around hybrid teaching and learning, multi-cultural competencies, and entrepreneurial and innovative thinking.

In the first year of the Strategic Plan's implementation (2012-2013), the CTE has been charged with expanding our portfolio of faculty development programs to include initial training and ongoing support for faculty as they design some of their courses into hybrid formats; the goal is to have 20% of our undergraduate courses become hybrid models within the next several years. With this in mind, the first year of the FPLC program will be more directive with hybrid teaching and learning offered as topics for two of the four FPLCs we are proposing; multi-cultural competencies and entrepreneurial and innovative thinking would provide the core topics for the other two FPLCs, respectively. In future years, faculty will be able to propose FPLC topics that are also in alignment with the Strategic Plan.

Additionally, the Strategic Plan emphasizes a "teacher-scholar" model for our faculty that encourages the synergy between teaching and research. We envision that FPLCs will act as a training opportunity for faculty who may have little experience with conducting research on their own teaching practices and their students' learning, and who may have little exposure to the role and practice of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning both within higher education and within their individual disciplines. As the objectives of the Strategic Plan are implemented over the coming years, FPLCs will be a crucial component in educating Suffolk's teacher-scholars about best practices for measuring the effectiveness of pedagogical and curricular changes and the impact of these changes on students' learning.

Leadership

Although the FPLC program will be administered by the CTE and will be initially supported financially by the Davis Educational Foundation and the CTE, this is a program offered in collaboration with several campus units including Diversity Services, Disability Services, Academic Technology, and the Provost's Office, among others. With the support of these units, the CTE will assume responsibility for the majority of the program's responsibilities, including advertising the program, reviewing facilitator and participant applications, managing the FPLC budgets, conducting periodic reviews of each FPLC's progress, hosting an annual celebration of the FPLCs, and reporting on FPLC progress to both university stakeholders and the Davis Educational Foundation. In particular, the Director and Assistant Director of the CTE will work closely with the FPLC program to train facilitators, monitor the program's progress, provide resources and support to each FPLC, and assess the participant-, course-, and institutional-level outcomes of each FPLC.

Methods

The FPLC program will be comprised of four groups of 8-10 participants each that are co-facilitated by a faculty member and a staff member or administrator at the university. All of the facilitators will attend a day-long training led by CTE staff the spring before their group is formed that will include additional information on budget logistics, best practices in facilitation, and the development and measurement of group outcomes. The FPLCs will be interdisciplinary and open to participants from the university's two colleges that offer undergraduate curricula (the College of Arts and Sciences and the Sawyer Business School). Participants will be asked to apply to their desired FPLC indicating their interest in the FPLC topic, their previous experience researching student learning, and their commitment to the year-long

community. Applicants will be chosen by CTE staff in collaboration with FPLC facilitators who will, based on the applicant pool, attempt to create FPLCs with participants of diverse ranks and disciplines.

After forming, each FPLC will collaboratively identify a measurable outcome tied to their group's topic that they will work to achieve through the year-long community. Each FPLC will also collaboratively decide on their budget allocation. Following a semester of reading and scholarly engagement (fall semester), each FPLC participant will be expected to propose (through an IRB application) and implement a pedagogical or curricular change in their classroom based on the theme of their FPLC (spring semester). Possible examples of outcomes include the incorporation and evaluation of hybrid learning activities, the implementation and assessment of new diversity-based curriculum, or the measurement of innovative thinking through a new survey tool.

In the first year of the program, FPLCs will be more directed to focus on areas that have been identified as priorities in our institutional Strategic Plan: hybrid learning, multi-cultural competencies, and entrepreneurial and innovative thinking. In the second and third year of the program, and for all years following, faculty will be asked to propose learning community topics informed by objectives within the institutional Strategic Plan. Selected proposals that are approved by the CTE advisory board of faculty, staff, and administrators will then be advertised to the campus community who can then apply to be part of the FPLC.

At the end of the program, FPLC members will be asked to present their findings to the university community through an end-of-the-year reception and poster session. In the summer following their FPLC classroom research project, each participant will be encouraged to draft a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) manuscript to submit for publication. FPLC alumni will receive support for SoTL publication through the CTE's established scholarship development programs. FPLC alumni will also be invited to mentor future FPLC participants through applying to facilitate an upcoming FPLC or through more informal opportunities such as FPLC networking brown bag lunches or small presentations to FPLC groups on their experiences with the program.

Timetable for Implementation for 2013-2014 (This schedule will be continued in 2014-2016)

Spring 2013	FPLC faculty and staff/administrator facilitators will be chosen; FPLC co-facilitators will be trained at a day-long training; FPLCs will be advertised to university community and participants will be chosen.
Summer 2013	Materials (such as books) for FPLCs will be purchased and distributed to participants.
Fall 2013	FPLCs officially start and meet every three weeks throughout the fall semester to plan a group outcome and the use of their FPLC budget, design their research projects, and begin drafting their IRB proposals. Facilitators will also have two scheduled meetings throughout the semester to discuss their FPLC's progress and check in with CTE staff.
Winter 2014	Check in meeting with all FPLC facilitators and participants. Submission of all IRB proposals. A survey will be distributed to FPLC facilitators and participants to assess each group's progress and movement toward achieving the program's stated goals. The first of two focus group interviews with each FPLC group will be conducted.
Spring 2014	FPLCs will continue to meet every three weeks and will start implementing their plans from fall 2013. Facilitators will also have two scheduled meetings throughout the semester to discuss their FPLC's progress and check in with CTE staff. A call for new FPLC facilitators will be distributed and applications will be accepted mid-semester. FPLC faculty facilitators will be chosen; FPLC facilitators will be trained at a day-long

	training; FPLCs will be advertised to university community and participants will be chosen. At the end of the semester, the CTE will host a celebration for the campus community to report on the outgoing group's progress and to welcome the incoming FPLC groups. An end-of-year survey will be distributed to outgoing FPLC facilitators and participants to assess each group's achievement of the program's stated goals. A second focus group meeting with each FPLC group will be conducted.
Summer 2014	Participants from the previous year of FPLCs will work on and submit SoTL manuscripts based on the pedagogical or curricular changes they made in their classrooms. Materials (such as books) for FPLCs will be purchased and distributed to participants for the new year of FPLCs.

Outcomes

The FPLC program outcomes will be assessed in three areas: (1) program evaluation; (2) measurement of impact on student learning; and (3) progress toward the implementation of Strategic Plan objectives (see table below). These three areas will be assessed using data collected from the FPLC participants and from student feedback regarding course-level changes. The aggregation of participant and student assessments will be used to measure the progressive implementation of institutional-level Strategic Planning objectives over the coming years.

In addition to the outcomes that are listed above and described in the table below, each FPLC will also generate its own outcomes during their first meeting in fall 2013 based on their FPLC topic and how they plan to use their budget for the year. These outcomes will help shape the work each community will complete over their year together. FPLC facilitators will receive training on best practices for helping their groups identify and measure meaningful and reasonable outcomes during the all-day training hosted by CTE staff in spring 2013.

The methods for data collection for the overall FPLC program outcomes are "authentic" assessments "designed to address learning that is meaningful to the learner and the skills and abilities needed to perform actual or real-world tasks" (Hubball, Clarke, & Beach 2004, 88). Authentic assessment measures include activities such as group projects, experiments, interviews, writing samples, and the construction of portfolios. The authentic assessments used by the CTE staff for program evaluation will be a model for FPLC participants of the kinds of measurements they can use in their own classrooms.

Outcome	Methods for Data Collection
<i>Program Evaluation: FPLCs will provide additional space for interdisciplinary collaborations and conversations regarding teaching and learning as well as training for conducting research on student learning.</i>	Focus group interviews using open-ended questions conducted with the FPLC groups at the end of each semester. Individual survey measurements using open-ended and closed questions to assess the impact of FPLCs on participants' interdisciplinary collaboration and the quality of the training FPLC participants receive before implementing their pedagogical and curricular changes. Evaluation of IRB proposal and implementation of the pedagogical or curricular changes being implemented by FPLC participants.
<i>Impact on Student Learning: FPLCs</i>	Individual interviews using open-ended questions with

<p><i>will strengthen teaching practices that will positively influence student learning.</i></p>	<p>participants in FPLCs to gauge changes in teaching and perceived positive impact on student learning.</p> <p>Pre- and post-survey measurements using open-ended and closed questions that will assess changes in FPLC participants’ teaching practices that are a result of FPLC membership.</p> <p>Analysis of data gathered by faculty from their courses and students.</p> <p>Publications resulting from the FPLC program.</p>
<p><u>Assessment of Strategic Plan Initiatives:</u> <i>FPLCs will support the collective implementation of the pedagogical and curricular objectives outlined in Charting the Future: A Strategic Plan for Suffolk University.</i></p>	<p>Ongoing and aggregate data collection of total faculty, staff, administrators, students, and courses directly impacted by the FPLC program.</p> <p>Ongoing and aggregate collection and reporting of findings from research conducted in individual classes through the FPLC program.</p>

The three FPLC outcomes described above are designed to support the implementation of the objectives outlined in the university-wide 2012 Strategic Plan. This program is particularly timely because the Strategic Plan offers a set of common goals around which FPLC participants can connect, converse, and collaborate. We believe that FPLCs will provide an excellent learning environment for faculty, staff and administrators to discuss the best practices for achieving and measuring pedagogical and curricular changes that will impact the entire Suffolk community in both the short- and long-term.

References

Cox, M.D. “Faculty Learning Communities: Change Agents for Transforming Institutions into Learning Organizations.” *To Improve the Academy*, 19 (2001): 69-93.

Cox, M.D. “The Development of New and Junior Faculty.” In *Teaching Improvement Practices: Successful Strategies for Higher Education*, edited by W.A. Wright and Associates. Bolton, MA: Ankor, 1995.

Hubball, H., Clarke, A. and Beach, A.L. “Assessing Faculty Learning Communities.” In *Building Faculty Learning Communities*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 97. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004. 87-100.

Institutional Mission and Unique Qualities

Mission: Suffolk University is a talent catalyst that recognizes and develops student potential. Leveraging our location in the heart of Boston, our faculty, staff, and alumni work together to provide a student-centered experience. This diverse community builds on its dedication and excellence in education and scholarship to empower graduates to be successful locally, regionally, and globally. *(Approved by the Academic Committee, Board of Trustees, September 2012; full Board approval forthcoming.)*

Founded in 1906 by Gleason L. Archer as the Suffolk School of Law for low-income and working students, Suffolk University's teaching, scholarship, and research today are dedicated to educating all students in the arts and sciences, business, and law so that they may become successful and conscientious citizens of the world. Across the undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools, Suffolk integrates theoretical and practical knowledge, instilling in students a passion for critical analysis and a desire for continuous learning. Suffolk fosters a compelling learning environment while rigorously upholding our founding principle of equal access for all. This commitment includes both a national and international engagement, reinforcing the growing importance of a diverse, global citizenry in the 21st century.

The College of Arts and Sciences now consists of 17 academic departments, including the New England School of Art and Design. The college offers more than 50 programs of specialized study, at the baccalaureate, master, and doctoral levels. Suffolk University Sawyer Business School's undergraduate and graduate programs emphasize global business practice. Nine undergraduate majors are offered, and graduate programs lead to more than a dozen advanced degrees, including joint degree programs with the Law School. Suffolk Business School also offers an online MBA program. The Law School offers Juris Doctor and Master of Laws degrees. Its expansive curriculum combines a strong academic foundation with expertise in an array of specialty areas. Nationally known faculty and a range of practical experiences provide superior preparation for law practice in the 21st century.

Since its inception in 2006, the Center for Teaching Excellence has worked to create programming where faculty from the three colleges can come together to gain insight into time-honored pedagogical theory and the latest trends in the profession, share best teaching practices, and learn more about how they can better their own practices in the classroom. This programming is in response to an institutional goal to strengthen the university community as "one university" rather than three separate colleges.