Young Institutions and New Faculty: Committing to Learning Communities

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New faculty are often overwhelmed at the start of their careers. At UNLV, we initiated a faculty learning community specifically for faculty who were hired in the past two years. This learning community supports teaching practice by providing evidence-based pedagogic practices and instructional technology support. Early results suggest that participants benefited from this guidance because they show higher rates of reflective practice, adoption of new technologies and/or pedagogies, and awareness of campus resources to support teaching than non-participating peers.

Faculty who feel supported are more likely to succeed in their academic jobs (Shapiro and Levine, 1999). Effective support and development strategies include mentoring (Savage et al. 2004), workshops (Field, 2018), and support groups (Lewallem et al., 2003). The Faculty Learning Community (FLC) is a hybrid approach that combines components of community-building with individual assistance in order to help faculty members maintain their professional momentum. Our FLC was designed to give faculty a more intimate, one-on-one consultative support experience that was customized to their unique needs, discipline, and pedagogic approach. In this way, the FLC was constructed to carefully navigate and intersect with the competing ideologies of individualism and collectivism often at play in higher education (Ortquist-Ahrens and Torosyan, 2009).

A key challenge for new faculty members at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, is to integrate new pedagogies with appropriate educational technology. In the 2019 EDUCAUSE faculty survey, approximately 50% of UNLV faculty members reported that they would be more effective instructors if they improved their skills with regard to lecture capture and other technology tools. Students echoed these sentiments because only 45% of UNLV undergraduate students indicated that their professors use technology to help them engage in creative or critical thinking tasks. Thus, the FLC program bridges the professional development needs of faculty members with the pedagogical needs of students by providing customized learning opportunities to FLC participants in the context of a supportive community of peers.

Literature Review

The use of faculty learning communities as a medium for faculty development has a long and established history (Cox, 2001). FLCs have been used in a variety of ways, such as supporting the scholarship of teaching and learning (Mauzer et al., 2010), building rapport amongst first year faculty (Fayne and Ortquist-Ahrens, 2006) improving student success (Eble and McKeachie, 1985), creating faculty change agents (Cox, 2001), and creating stronger bonds between online faculty and their virtual institutions (Velez, 2009). While evidence suggests that FLCs are effective instruments through which faculty development can be conducted (Ward and Selvester, 2012), there is less evidence around FLCs that focus on new faculty (Menges, 1999), particularly an FLC that is specific to instructional technology and new faculty (Vaughn, 2004). Newly hired university faculty travel an undulating professional terrain, so almost any pedagogic, technology, or communitarian support is appreciated (McKee and Tew, 2013).

UNLV’s FLC model was inspired by a modification of Nugent et al.’s model (2008). In this model, the FLC met every two weeks and included eight participants. The meetings were semi-structured to ensure sufficient time for instruction, while also allowing ample opportunity for peer support and...
community-building. UNLV is a newly minted R1 institution, and UNLV faculty members maintain hectic schedules with many competing responsibilities, such as publishing, teaching, and service. Thus, we chose to engage a modified model that reaches a larger number of faculty members (15), and limits the burden of a frequent meeting schedule. Previous research suggests that structuring the FLC in this way provides faculty members with more time to experiment with technology in an environment of institutional support (Furco and Moely, 2012).

Because studies suggest that active learning tends to encourage positive learning outcomes (Lumpkin et al., 2015), facilitators of our FLC consciously steered faculty away from lecture-driven pedagogic techniques. We discovered that many of the FLC participants were already somewhat familiar with the concept of active learning; however, many participants were not sure how to use technology as a medium for active learning. Hence, bringing these approaches together became the central focus of the FLC.

**Learning Community Model**

Traditional FLC’s are often facilitated by faculty development professionals (Sandell et al., 2004) or academic faculty (Middendorf, 2004), but UNLV’s model, which is sponsored by the Office of Information Technology, the Lied Library, and the Office of Faculty Affairs, is facilitated by instructional technology staff. Eligibility for FLC participation was limited to tenure-track faculty members who joined UNLV during the previous two years. Under these guidelines, approximately 162 faculty members were eligible to apply. Interested faculty members were encouraged to submit a paragraph of interest to FLC leaders, describing a teaching practice they would like to enhance through the FLC. Hence, bringing these approaches together became the central focus of the FLC.

The FLC cohort met three times during each semester (fall and spring) in order to engage in semi-structured discussions about how to use technology to enhance the teaching/learning experience. Personnel from the Office of Educational Technology facilitated these sessions and provided real-time guidance, such as pedagogical ideas or technology demonstrations, to help FLC participants understand how they can implement different technologies in the classroom.

Although a variety of technologies were discussed, several technologies were accorded special attention during the first three FLC meetings. The first technology, Panopto, is UNLV’s lecture capture video platform. In addition to lecture capture, Panopto enables students to submit video reactions to readings or material. This active learning process helps students understand how to become “multimodal” communicators who are “effective and literate actors” in a 21st century context (Selfe and Selfe, 2008, p.86). This approach also helps faculty members assess comprehension and address comprehension issues by creating short videos that clarify targeted content.

The second technology highlighted during the initial meetings of the FLC is UNLV’s new Knowledge Production Center or Maker Space. This facility, housed in the main library, hosted an FLC meeting in the space, which includes a TV production studio, 3-D printing space, laser-cutting tools, and podcast recording studios. Faculty members who would like to use the space in their classes must complete a one hour orientation before they are able to schedule their class in the space. Thus, the goal of holding the FLC meeting in the space was to have a mini-orientation and create interest so that FLC participants would follow-up and complete the formal orientation. By the conclusion of the first FLC term, two participants completed the orientation. Thus, of the 14 active FLC members, 14.3% completed the Maker Space orientation, which is progress to the first year target of 5 completed orientations (33%).

After the first two FLC meetings, participants had at least one private meeting with educational technology staff. These personalized meetings lasted approximately one hour and took place in the faculty’s office in the hopes of minimizing any disruptions to their work. Faculty were asked to think about their greatest pedagogical challenge...
before the meeting and to write a brief (one page) reflection about the challenge. In some cases, we also reviewed the syllabi of the courses to better understand their teaching style.

In this session, technology staff guided a brainstorming discussion based on the reflections to clarify each faculty member’s individual needs. These meetings were very consultative in nature, and further clarified the desired outcome(s) of participants. Two technology staff members attended the first meeting to allow more thorough note-taking, idea generation, and proposed solutions. Following the meeting, technology staff jointly prepared a customized proposal for each faculty member. The jointly prepared proposal was a collaborative venture, and the final document often included feedback, ideas, and guidance from other technology staff members who did not attend the initial consultation. FLC participants were encouraged to choose one or two specific student assignments, interventions, or technologies from their customized plan to implement in their class during the subsequent semester. To facilitate implementation, technology staff members extended support using e-mail, telephone, and video conferencing.

To successfully complete the program, faculty members must attend five of the six FLC meetings. Additionally, faculty members must complete their pedagogical implementation plan, and they commit to present their work in a small forum at the conclusion of the FLC. Program completion can be time intensive, so the program offers a $1,000 stipend to faculty members who complete all requirements. Completing faculty members will also receive letters of commendation from three vice provosts.

At the halfway point in the program, 14 of the 15 participants were still active in the program. Thus, the cohort is on-track to reach the target of 12 completions by the conclusion of the program.

Method

A formal assessment of an FLC is an important part of program evaluation (Hubball et al., 2004). Early assessments of this pilot program relied primarily on survey data. At the conclusion of each individual meeting, FLC members completed a short, anonymous electronic survey. This survey allowed FLC participants to evaluate their experience in the meeting and offer comments and suggestions about how these meetings could be improved in the future. The information provided early insight into the value of this component of the FLC experience, and it also ensures that all participants are receiving equivalent levels of service from information technology staff. Nine of the 14 FLC participants completed the follow-up survey after their individual consultation, producing a for a response rate of 64%.

An additional electronic survey covering pedagogical practices and faculty perception of knowledge, learning, and reflection was administered after half of the FLC meetings were complete. This survey was delivered to 162 respondents: 14 FLC participants and 148 faculty members who were eligible to participate in the FLC. Thirty-eight respondents completed the survey for a response rate of 23%. Eight respondents (21%) were active members of the FLC, and the remainder of respondents were FLC eligible. We compared the responses between the two groups and we hypothesize that FLC participants will report higher levels of interaction with other faculty members, a higher level of pedagogical learning/reflection, more knowledge and use of campus technology resources, and a more robust perception of growth in areas related to campus technology than their non-FLC peers.

Results

On the follow-up survey after the individual consultation, all survey respondents reported that they understand why there were individual meetings. When asked about the length of their consultation, 67% of respondents indicated that they spent approximately 45 minutes in the meeting, whereas the remaining 33% of respondents spent about an hour. Respondents were asked whether the consultation was too long, too short, or about right, and 100% of respondents reported that the length of the consultation was “about right.”

FLC survey respondents felt that individual consultations were beneficial: 100% of respondents reported that the individual consultation was a good use of their time. Similarly, all respondents indicated that the private discussions offered student engagement solutions that were tailored to their needs. Respondents also reported that consultations were beneficial for developing their pedagogical action plan. Only one item, the individual meeting provided helpful classroom engagement strategies, did not have 100% of responses in the agree/strongly agree category. One respondent selected “disagree”
on this item (11%) and one selected “neither agree nor disagree” (11%). Thus, these results indicate the individual meetings were a positive component of the FLC for the majority of participants.

On the second survey, the FLC respondents had a different cluster of responses than their FLC eligible peers. For example, respondents were asked, “during this semester, I worked with instructional technology staff on strategies to enhance student engagement.” Fifty-seven percent of FLC eligible respondents reported that they “never” worked with instructional technology staff in this way during the semester, and thirty percent of the FLC eligible group reported that they worked with educational technology personnel one of two times during the semester.

In contrast, 62.5% of FLC participants reported that they worked with educational technology staff more than three times during the semester, and the remaining 37.5% of FLC respondents reported that they worked with educational technology staff one or two times during the semester. Thus, 100% of FLC participants worked with educational technology staff during the semester, whereas 57% of FLC eligible respondents did not work with educational technology staff at all during the semester.

Table 1 displays a cluster of survey questions in which we compared FLC eligible respondents to their FLC participant peers. The groups had similar responses in only one area: interaction with faculty members outside of department. Thus, 70% of the FLC eligible respondents agreed/strongly agreed on the question, “during this semester, I interacted with faculty members who are not in my department.” Similarly, 88% of FLC participants selected agree/strongly agree on this question. This finding suggests that faculty have opportunities to interact with peers outside their department, regardless of FLC participation.

The survey responses indicate that FLC participants had different responses than their FLC eligible peers on questions related to teaching, technology, and access to campus resources. In all these areas, the data indicate that FLC participants are acquiring new pedagogical techniques (88% to 43%), discovering campus resources to support teaching (100% to 46%), learning new strategies to incorporate technology into classroom instruction (88% to 47%), and identifying improvements they would like to make in their teaching (100% to 60%) at much higher rates than their non-participating peers. Thus, data indicates that FLC participation facilitates reflection on teaching practice so that faculty members can acquire new pedagogical tools, while also leveraging technology in order to improve their teaching practices.

As mentioned earlier, Panopto and the Maker Space were highlighted during the first three FLC meetings. The survey results indicate that this focus translated into perceived knowledge growth for FLC participants. For instance, both groups were asked to rate how their knowledge changed with regard to the Knowledge Production Center (Maker Space) since the beginning of the semester. Of the group that was eligible for the FLC, 0% reported that they had significant or very significant growth in their knowledge during the semester, whereas 63% of FLC participants reported significant or very significant growth in their knowledge.

Similarly, the knowledge growth in Panopto (lecture capture) was divergent between the two groups with 73% of FLC eligible respondents indicating no change in their Panopto knowledge during the semester. In contrast, 50% of FLC participants reported significant or very significant growth in knowledge with regard to lecture capture. Hence, data from the pilot program suggests that FLC participants perceived a greater increase in their knowledge in specific technologies, which is a sharp

| Table 1. Faculty Pedagogy Survey: Percent of Respondents who Strongly Agree/Agree |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------|--------|
| During this semester...                      | FLC Eligible | FLC Participant |
| I discovered campus resources that support my teaching | 46%    | 100%   |
| I identified something I would like to improve in my teaching | 60%    | 100%   |
| I acquired at least one new pedagogical technique | 43%    | 88%    |
| I learned new strategies to incorporate technology into my teaching | 47%    | 88%    |
| I interacted with faculty members who are not in my department | 70%    | 88%    |
contrast with the level of knowledge growth reported by the comparison group. In a sense, the FLC served as the connective tissue that brought faculty together to experience, discuss, and consider these pedagogic and technological possibilities.

Conclusion

Early data indicates that the inaugural cohort of the FLC is helping faculty members acquire new pedagogical practices and pair these practices with UNLV-supported technology. Currently, more than 90% of the cohort remains active and eligible for program completion, and survey results suggest that FLC participants benefit from their participation in the learning community. In the spring of 2020, FLC members will implement at least one suggestion from their customized action plan into classroom practice. The implementation process is collaborative because participants receive guidance and support from staff in educational technology throughout the process. In addition, once the FLC has officially concluded, technology staff will continue to work with these faculty to adjust, refine, and improve their innovations.

Assessment will continue throughout this year and beyond. Technology staff will gather FLC members’ current and future syllabi in order to create a pre-post comparison that documents changes in pedagogy and technology. Furthermore, several participants expressed interest in continued assessment of strategy implementation by charting student learning outcomes against learning outcomes from previous versions of a class. The FLC program has already been approved for the next academic year, and there are plans to possibly expand the program to remote campus locations. Over time, this process will yield information about which technologies FLC participants adopted and retained in their classes, while also demonstrating how these new pedagogies affect student learning and performance. Finally, we are planning a campus-wide communication plan to profile some of the faculty participants.

References


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