

Lessons from the Field: “Tracer” Study Shows Connections Between Faculty Development and Student Learning

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Introduction

How do programs for faculty development in pedagogy influence teaching and student learning in higher education? Given the importance of student learning outcomes at all levels, from the institution to the course, can an institution gauge the degree to which improved teaching leads to improved outcomes? Moreover, how are such programs supported in the institutional budget?

These questions informed a study funded by the Spencer Foundation and conducted by faculty and staff at Washington State University (WSU) in Pullman, WA, and Carleton College in Northfield, MN. Other than shared geographic latitude, the two institutions would seem to have little in common: One is a large, public, land-grant university with multiple colleges and degrees, and the other is a small, private, liberal arts college that grants a baccalaureate degree. However, both institutions have devoted resources to faculty programs designed to improve teaching that align with learning outcomes. The study traced (hence its nickname, “Tracer”) the effects of faculty development on teaching and found evidence that student learning is improved as a result. Evidence obtained from both campuses is detailed in Condon, et al., (2016).

Spanning more than three years and using multiple methods, including faculty interviews; analysis of syllabi and assignments; classroom observations; and analysis of students’ work, the study sought to situate the effects of faculty development on student learning within the broader context of the campus culture. Both institutions point to long-standing portfolio assessments of student writing as a site for research. The study emphasized that faculty development programs informed by assessment helped motivate the pedagogical changes that promote improved learning.

For example, Carleton’s strategy for faculty development stresses the articulation of course learning goals; scaffolding of large assignments with smaller, staged components; providing feedback on required drafts; and using rubrics and other response techniques that connect with learning goals. A typical workshop on say, using data in writing assignments, would touch on all of the foregoing as well as specific ways to incorporate quantitative information—written and visual—into assignments for courses ranging from social sciences to natural sciences to humanities.

Study Findings

The study shines a light on lessons about faculty development which may be useful in other institutional contexts such as: identify clear goals for changes in instruction that align to institutional goals; align institutional goals with

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student competencies that faculty value; promote excellent teaching through explicit support opportunities; and be mindful of opportunities where routine faculty work can embed faculty learning about teaching. Following are major findings of the Tracer study.

1. Retrospective assessment of course documents and student work—obtained, at both campuses, through writing portfolios and faculty generosity—showed growth in assignment clarity and sophistication that supported improvements in students' learning as demonstrated in their written work. Such evidence is heartening, especially to those who argue for consistent funding for faculty development programming.
2. Improvements are identified at the institutional level as well as in individual classrooms. Short-term assessments of individual classrooms can miss the effects of continued improvements. The Tracer study centered on overarching competencies valued by the institution's faculty and detected in student writing across disciplines. The faculty development goals aligned to the campus initiative, which aligned to specific student learning competencies. To test the connections, researchers applied an assessment instrument to the data that reflected the institutional alignment of the initiative, the faculty development which supported it, the changed faculty practices, and the demonstrated student learning. Changes at the course level reflect institutional goals of improving teaching and learning.
3. The study also uncovered the snowball effect of formal faculty development at Carleton. Carleton offers a support structure that includes formal faculty development, grants for curricular changes, brown bag series, and outside speakers, all of which promote experimentation with real resources. When faculty perceive that work and experimentation on teaching is valued and rewarded by the institution, good practices spread. Both campuses revealed the spread of teaching practices to those who were not involved in the formal faculty development events.
4. Cultivating teaching as a learning process for faculty can support institutional goals. The study found that the ability of faculty to bring their new knowledge into practice relied on the institutional context. At both sites, service work, such as committee service, offered opportunities for the faculty learning process to take hold. Faculty from WSU and Carleton perceived writing portfolio rating sessions as powerful opportunities for learning about teaching. Other routine sites of faculty professional life including hiring practices, faculty orientations, performance evaluations, and curricular planning. Any and all of such activities can support learning about teaching.

Final Thoughts

Every campus has a culture of teaching and learning. The Tracer findings revealed the generative nature of teaching and learning at both institutions. It was easy to identify the high participators of faculty development at both sites: These faculty thrive on improving their teaching; are likely to lead campus initiatives, hold lunchtime discussions, bring in outside experts, and catalyze positive changes in teaching and learning. While these faculty may be well known within a small liberal arts college, they are visible in other ways at larger institutions. For example, at WSU, a group of faculty recognized as members of the President's Teaching Academy designed the Six Learning Goals of the Baccalaureate.

Case Study: Washington State University

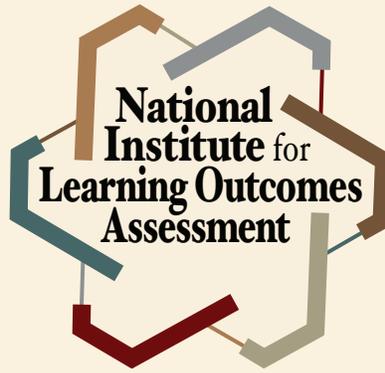


Ultimately, by making visible the substantial faculty learning that is taking place, a generative culture of teaching and learning can support innovation in teaching and excellence in student learning. Institutions do well to invest in activities that speak to faculty learning as well as to student learning outcomes. In sum, professional development opportunities are shown to increase student learning, not only for those that participate directly, but for the campus as a whole. Investments in professional learning of all types create a productive culture of teaching and learning, increasing the capacity of faculty to learn about effective education and improve their practice. Campuses seeking to create strong educational environments for their students benefit from such investments.

Cultivating teaching as a learning process for faculty can support institutional goals.

Reference

Condon, W., Iverson, E. R., Manduca, C. A., Rutz, C., & Willett, G. (2016). *Faculty development and student learning: Assessing the connections*. Indiana University Press.



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