OVERVIEW

What is a Faculty Learning Community (FLC)?

“A FLC is a cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group…(8-12 members is the recommended size) who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning…frequent activities provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building” (Cox 2004, http://www.units.miamioh.edu/flc/whatis.php).

Usually individual or groups of faculty propose FLC topics, goals, and objectives to an FLC committee; others join once the FLC is approved.

Faculty learning communities are committed to “a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done” (McGill & Beaty, 2001). FLCs are more than just seminar series, formal committees, project teams, or support, self-development, or counseling groups. FLCs have voluntary membership; meet at a designated time and in an environment conducive to learning; develop empathy among members; operate by consensus, not majority; develop their own culture, openness, and trust; engage complex problems; energize and empower participants; have the potential of transforming institutions into learning organizations; and are holistic in approach.

Faculty learning communities do not focus extensively on negotiated timing or other formal structures at meetings. FLCs have more focus on the social aspects of building community: Off-campus retreats and conferences include times for fun, and a dinner or gathering during the year may include spouses or partners. FLCs include more emphasis on the team aspect (while still consulting about and developing each individual’s project) and on the ultimate beneficiaries of the program: the students in the participants’ courses and those participating as student associates of the FLC (Cox & Sorenson, 1999).

FLC Program Rationale and Description:

The Quad-POD Consortium is exploring the development of a Faculty Learning Communities (FLC) Program across all four Flint higher education institutions (Baker College, Mott CC, Kettering, and UM-Flint). We believe that while each institution may have its own culture, we have many commonalities too - especially where student learning is involved. We are excited about the conversations, sharing of teaching ideas and implementation of new practices that can result from these scholarly interactions.

In 2015-16, Quad-POD offered a pilot FLC “Learner-Centered Classrooms” and three FLCs emerged (a fourth FLC did not get off the ground): Student Engagement, Retention of Knowledge, and Technology in Education. The first two FLCs are presenting at Lilly Conference in Traverse City this fall and the third FLC created a Blackboard Help Book that will be published for distribution across all four institutions. The Student Engagement FLC is also submitting proposals to present at national conferences in 2017.

A survey of 2015-16 FLC faculty members yielded the following results:

1. Most faculty agreed that participation in the FLC stimulated their thinking about teaching and learning (4.78 out of 5 rating). Comments included: “great ideas from other instructors, wonderful critique and camaraderie”, “It made me consider how participation in a 4-campus collaboration would impact what and how I thought and students learned – how would it be different than what I normally do?”
2. All faculty appreciated the opportunity to engage with colleagues from different institutions (5 out of 5 rating). Comments include: “Collaborating/learning from colleagues from other campuses was perhaps the most rewarding aspect” (this response was echoed in most of the responses), and “Not just different institutions, but different disciplines proved to be extremely helpful”

3. The most challenging aspect of the FLC was finding time to meet.

4. All three FLCs plan to continue their collaboration in 2016-17.

**FLC CATEGORIES**

There are two categories of Faculty Learning Communities: **Cohort-based** and **Topic-based**.

**Cohort-based learning communities** address the teaching, learning, and developmental needs of an important cohort of faculty that has been particularly affected by the isolation, fragmentation, or chilly climate in the academy. The program is shaped by the participants to include a broad range of teaching and learning areas and topics of interest to them. Examples of cohort-based communities include: those for junior faculty, for mid-career and senior faculty, for Preparing Future Faculty (graduate students), and for department chairs.

**Topic-based learning communities** are designed to address a special teaching and learning issue prevalent on all four campuses, for example, diversity, technology, or cooperative learning. Examples of topic-based communities include: Issues in Academic Integrity; Mindfulness and Contemplative Learning in Higher Education; Leveraging Mobile Devices to Enhance Learning; Exploring Open Educational Resources (OERs); Designing Inclusive Classrooms; Flipped Classrooms; Learner-Centered Classrooms; among many others.

Faculty learning communities are more structured and intensive than most approaches that gather together a collection of faculty to meet and work on teaching and learning issues—for example, teaching circles (Quinlan, 1996), book clubs, seminars, courses, or a group coming together over “brown bag” lunches to read and discuss articles on teaching. FLCs develop a product from their collaboration; this may include a change in the way individual courses are taught (redesign); intercampus student engagement; presentations or publications.

**GOALS**

Each Faculty Learning Community has its own specific goals and objectives, which the facilitator and members determine. Long-term goals may include:

- Build a **City-wide higher education community** through teaching and learning
- Increase faculty **interest in undergraduate** teaching and learning
- Investigate and incorporate ways that **difference can enhance** teaching and learning
- Nourish the scholarship of teaching and its **application to student learning**
- Broaden the **evaluation of teaching** and the **assessment of learning**
- Increase faculty **collaboration across disciplines**
- Encourage reflection about **liberal education** and **coherence** of learning across disciplines
- Increase the **rewards** for and **prestige of excellent** teaching
- Increase **financial support** for teaching and learning initiatives
- Create an **awareness of the complexity** of teaching and learning

**ACTIVITIES**

At the national level, Faculty Learning Community activities vary but are likely to include:
• **Seminars on teaching and learning.** Topics include assessment of student learning, enhancing the teaching/learning experience through awareness of students’ intellectual development, sharing student and faculty views of teaching and learning, and topics selected from articles or books that participants of the communities select to read. Some seminars are led by guest faculty, others are conducted by the participants themselves.

• **Retreats.** An opening/closing retreat may be held in late winter or early spring, with "graduating" community sharing information with new participants on various aspects of the program, such as seminar topics, student associate selection, and teaching projects. *Our FLC program will culminate in a mini-conference rather than a “retreat”, with the same goal as listed above.*

• **Teaching projects.** Community members pursue self-designed learning programs, including an individual teaching project, for which they may receive financial support.

• **National conferences.** Faculty Learning Communities may apply to participate in the annual Miami Lilly Conference on College Teaching (or as indicated above – the Lilly Conference in Traverse City), where nationally known teacher-scholars interact with Miami faculty and guests from other campuses.

• **Faculty partner.** On some campuses, an FLC member selects a colleague to work with during the year. In the case of junior faculty, the person is an experienced faculty member who serves as a mentor. Senior faculty community members pair up as in the New Jersey Partners in Learning model. (NOTE: At UM-Flint, faculty mentorship is a separate program)

• **Student associates.** Each participant selects one or two students who provide student perspectives on teaching, learning, projects, and topics encountered in the community.

• **Course mini-portfolio.** Each participant selects a focus course in which to try innovations and prepares a course mini-portfolio that analyzes and provides evidence of student learning.

**FACILITATION**

The FLC Facilitator role **differs** from other familiar roles of content expert, lecturer, or chairperson. Facilitators are “local line leaders” leading academic change. The following roles are important:

• **Facilitator of learning,** bringing teaching wisdom and experience to the role.

• **Political strategist** and **activist,** providing opportunity to facilitate change in the classroom, department, and institution.

• **Communication specialist,** actively listening to issues and challenges of FLC members and communicating these to appropriate faculty and administrators.

• **Entrepreneur,** finding and directing human and social capital, discovering talented colleagues, and encouraging new teaching procedures.

• **Cheerleader,** energizing and empowering members to accomplish their goals.

• **Planner,** coordinating and scheduling seminars, retreats, and other gatherings.

• **Collaborator,** working with FLC Director/members to meet objectives and build community.

As stated in the call for applications for Quad-Pod FLCs, the **facilitator is responsible for:**

1. **Convening** a minimum of one face-to-face meeting each month from October through May. Ideally, the meeting location will rotate across campuses and Quad-POD members can assist in reserving meeting space.

2. **Maintaining** a contact list for all active members and reporting participation at meetings to the FLC coordinator.

3. **Coordinating the communication** between members of the FLC (including items under #1 above).

4. **Working with** the Quad-POD administrative coordinator to process and report expenses.
QUALITIES FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY

A Faculty Learning Community is a faculty group engaging in activities that provide learning, development, and community. The following qualities guide the design and process of a faculty learning community.

1. **Safety and Trust.** In order for participants to connect with each other, there must be a sense of safety and trust. This is especially true as participants reveal weaknesses in their teaching or unfamiliarity with teaching processes or literature.

2. **Openness.** In an atmosphere of openness, participants can freely share their thoughts and feelings without fear of retribution. For example, in the Community Using Difference to Enhance Teaching and Learning at Miami, participants were able to discuss ways that other participants or colleagues offend them.

3. **Respect.** In order to coalesce as a learning community, members need to feel that they are valued and respected as people. It is important for the university to acknowledge their participation and financially support community projects and attendance at related conferences.

4. **Responsiveness.** Members must respond respectfully to each other, and the facilitator(s) must respond quickly to their participants. The facilitation should welcome concerns and preferences, and when appropriate, share these with individuals and the community.

5. **Collaboration.** The importance of collaboration in consultation and group discussion on individual members' projects and on achieving learning outcomes hinges on the group's ability to work with and respond to each other. In addition to individual projects, joint projects and presentations should be welcomed.

6. **Relevance.** Learning outcomes are enhanced by relating the subject matter to the participants' teaching, courses, scholarship, and life experiences. All participants should be encouraged to seek out and share teaching and other real-life examples to illustrate them.

7. **Challenge.** Expectations for the quality of outcomes should be high, engendering a sense of progress, scholarship, and accomplishment. Sessions should include, for example, those in which individuals share syllabi and report on their individual projects.

8. **Enjoyment.** Activities must include social opportunities to lighten up, bond, and should take place in invigorating environments. For example, a retreat can take place off campus at a nearby country inn, state park, historic site, or the like.

9. **Esprit de Corps.** Sharing individual and community outcomes with colleagues in the academy should generate pride and loyalty. For example, when the community makes a campus-wide presentation, participants strive to provide an excellent session.

10. **Empowerment.** A sense of empowerment is both a crucial element and a desired outcome of participation in a faculty learning community. In the construction of a transformative learning environment, the participants gain a new view of themselves and a new sense of confidence in their abilities. Faculty leave their year of participation with better courses and clearer understanding of themselves and their students. Key outcomes include scholarly teaching and contributions to the scholarship of teaching.

REFERENCES