

## Faculty Collaboratives for Teaching and Learning

Nazareth College of Rochester

### Interim Report

The purpose of the first year of the Faculty Collaboratives for Teaching and Learning was twofold. First it was designed to introduce a strategy—namely, teaching and learning circles—into the culture at Nazareth College. Second, it was hoped that through in depth exploration of a variety of assessment approaches, a model might be found that would foster greater and more widespread faculty understanding and ownership of the assessment process, especially in ways that affect student learning.

Like many other small colleges where teaching is a valued and highly visible part of its mission, faculty development efforts at Nazareth College have historically resided in an assortment of relatively fragmented grassroots efforts. And while these efforts have had many positive effects, it is generally agreed that their cumulative impact has been somewhat compromised by their inherently fragmented roots. Accordingly, and in response to this need, Nazareth College recently formally established a Center for Teaching Excellence. The challenge for this Center will be to build upon an assortment of existing (and historical) initiatives while providing consultation to those initiatives. In a sense, then, the mission of the Center is both an integrative and an educational one, which among its other initiatives would implement the Collaboratives project. In so doing it was hoped that synergy among these initiatives could be found as the existing institutional framework for faculty development activities begins to shift from one-time events to a model involving sustained, sequential, and collegial activities. An initial activity to further this goal was the implementation of the concept of a teaching circle into the existing faculty development culture at Nazareth.

The basic architecture of the circles was as follows: To join a circle, faculty are asked to commit to 4 meetings per semester, in exchange for which they were to receive a \$500 honorarium for the year and the opportunity to apply for a development grant (up to \$1000).

The plan for the first year of the project called for the implementation of three teaching and learning circles—one addressing interdisciplinary learning, one addressing web-enhanced learning through the use of Blackboard software, and the third addressing a topic to be selected by the participants.

Accordingly, in Fall 2001, an introduction to the concept of teaching and learning circles was presented at Faculty Assembly Day. Based on that presentation, 16 faculty from a variety of disciplines elected to participate in the circles, a number that was well within the anticipated participation range of 14-18. The prospective circle members then met to agree upon and articulate a focus for their discussions, designate a facilitator, and select meeting times. All circles met as least as often as planned. And as planned, all circle participants completed both pre and post written reflections in response to the following three questions.

- - • What challenges do you find in understanding the connections between what you do in the classroom, *how* students learn, and *what* they learn? What evidence causes you to raise this as an area of challenge?
- - • What changes can you make in your practice that might improve the learning process and student outcomes? Why do you think this change(s) will lead to improvement?
- • How will you assess whether changes in the process and outcomes of student learning have taken place as a result of changes in pedagogy?

At a strictly practical level, implementation of the grant went pretty much as expected. Faculty met on a regular basis and were serious about their involvement, often meeting beyond the scheduled time limits. Of the 16 original members, 15 remain at

Nazareth College and 14 have indicated some interest in continuing with the circle discussions.

What transpired during the sessions, however, varied considerably given the very different nature of the focal topics. Thus, it is not surprising that many of the issues that emerged during the year, varied considerably among the groups. For the five members of the group that examined the issue of web-enhanced instruction, for example, initial reflections centered on what types of learning experiences they could design that would have a positive impact on what students learned and how they learned. The use of on-line discussion was also of particular interest to the group. Although members of this circle began by addressing broad questions of pedagogy surrounding technology, the need to acquire technical proficiency often precluded the depth of discussion hoped for. In the end all members of this group seemed to agree that the tension between the practical and theoretical had become problematic over time.

Ultimately this group seemed to agree that an attempt to blend practical discussions with the more abstract ones about whether (and when) technology would provide a solution to problems fostering student learning was ill-advised. Rather the two discussions it was agreed should be separate. It was also agreed that proficiency could be developed outside of the circle meetings. In this regard the instructional technology coordinator, who had been a member of this group, agreed to design some activities geared strictly toward the questions that had arisen and toward fostering the desired proficiency. He has also agreed to identify readings to use as a focus for the discussions in year two. While some seemed to feel more tension than others regarding the disjuncture between theory and practice, all agreed that the discussions had been worthwhile.

Similarly, the five faculty who participated in the Interdisciplinary Learning circle also began with a set of issues that could be both practical and theoretical, although the tension here was not nearly as great. Nor did it sway the discussion as completely. This circle had formed because of an increased interest and institutional emphasis on

interdisciplinary learning. That is, a new Master's Degree in Liberal Studies was launched in 2002 with courses in the program being interdisciplinary and team-taught. That new emphasis seemed to motivate participants as they grappled with the various definitions of interdisciplinary, while also trying to address the practical question of how to bring interdisciplinary perspectives into the classroom. In so doing they also struggled with fundamental issues of how students learn and meeting the needs of diverse learners. At the end, most participants seemed to have as many new questions as answers, but all agree that overall they had found the process surprisingly useful and wished to continue with some minor modifications.

Finally, and in contrast to the others, for the five faculty who joined the Pedagogy and Social Justice circle, the issue of practice versus theory never emerged. Nor did they seem to struggle as much with what the topic should be. The sense of group cohesion here was probably strongest of the three circles, in part perhaps because the topic was reached by consensus. The circle discussion focused mainly on the broad issues of how to mediate between pedagogical goals, questions of assessment, issues of activism, and social justice. An English professor expressed the challenge especially well: "I'd like to work on bringing political issues and questions into my classrooms in . . . ways that make the students feel the importance of confronting and deciding for themselves what they think. "

What are the larger lessons of this experience? The expectation for the first year was to pilot a model for faculty development that had not been used before, (i.e., a learning circle) and to gather information about how this experience might become integrated into and ultimately affect the large picture of faculty development at Nazareth. Among the questions under consideration were: Would faculty be willing to commit to a regular series of discussions? What did it take for them to make this commitment? What would be the impact of those discussions—on their students and on themselves? How could what was learned in that process of implementing teaching circles (and their evaluation) be applied to both the second year of circle implementation and the broader issues of faculty development at Nazareth? Interviews with the participants and a brief

survey revealed a number of interesting and obvious patterns regarding the reasons why individual faculty had responded to the idea and the impact it had had on them. Specifically, when asked in a survey why they had participated, the most frequent reasons chosen included that: 1) they had wanted to learn about new strategies to use in classes (83% \*); 2) had liked the idea of meeting regularly to talk with colleagues about teaching (83%); 3) had found the topic appealing (58%); and 4) had liked the idea of having a structured opportunity to reflect on their teaching (58%).

Given how important the opportunity to talk with others had been to these faculty, it is not wholly surprising that when reflecting on the benefit(s) of their participation, nearly all (92%) indicated that a notable outcome had been that they had simply enjoyed talking with my colleagues about teaching. Further, that even a slim majority indicated that they had implemented some new activities in a course(s) (67%) seems significant. Although we don't yet have data about how widespread such changes are at Nazareth, these data are certainly encouraging. Another compelling finding, although not as yet a robust one, is that one fourth of those who participated indicated that they had seen a clear improvement in student learning as a result of changes they had made based on participation in the circle discussion. Finally, when asked about how to proceed in the second year, three quarters of those who participated clearly indicated that they wished to continue the discussion but also that they would welcome a limited number of newcomers to the group.

However, there was also a common negative critique that emerged repeatedly through the interviews and group discussion. Namely, almost to a person, participants indicated some level of frustration with having had an externally imposed set of focus questions that could not be obviously linked to either the topic or to their reasons for joining. What faculty wanted, alternatively, was an opportunity to determine through consensus—and in consultation with the director of the Center—a set of questions that would be tailored to the goals of the group rather than being applied externally. They also wanted an opportunity to progress toward those goals with autonomy. Clearly finding a balance between providing enough structure to the circles to assure that the results

ultimately will be translate to improvements in student learning, while providing enough freedom for full discussion of issues proved may not be easy. But given the findings of the first year it seems crucial. Accordingly, during the upcoming year, we will explore changes in the focus questions themselves, changes in when the questions are posed to circles, and changes in the structure of circle sessions.

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Of those who participated in the circles, roughly half also took advantage of the instructional mini-grants. These seven circle participants received summer stipends to engage in major course revision or development based on their work during the year. All seven were able to complete substantial work in constructing new syllabi, though most felt they had not fully completed the task. They will be offering their new and/or revised courses during the upcoming year. Reports of the benefits of completing these grants have been quite compelling thus far. In light of the fact that most have not yet fully implemented their grants, in depth survey and analysis of the impact of the grant process is still pending.

Finally, to begin to build assessment capacity and explore the range of assessment strategies that might be used to facilitate greater understanding and ownership of the assessment process, an external consultant, Dr. Stephen Sharkey of Alverno College, conducted a half-day workshop for the entire Nazareth faculty. The session began with an overview of assessment and described Alverno's "student-assessment-as-learning" model. At the end of the session, faculty were asked to gather by department to discuss the ways that the ideas presented in the workshop could influence their work. During the summer, two faculty members went to Alverno College to attend their workshops (a third was scheduled to attend but fell ill). Both of these faculty members will be available to project participants in the upcoming year for consultation on assessment. But feedback thus far suggests that "The Alverno Model" may not fit with the liberal arts history and goals of Nazareth College. Other assessment models are presently being explored, including those from the Harvard Assessment Seminars (See Light, 1990).

Overall then we were pleased with the result of this first year. The feedback from participants was surprisingly uniform and positive, especially with regard to the value of having remained as a committed and consistent group. Consensus among faculty is fairly rare; yet virtually all who participated remained through the year and nearly all could report at least one, and often several, meaningful results. The positive impact of talking with colleagues and feeling comfortable in doing so was also evident. And even at this early date that many could report these discussions had supported changes that had positively affected student learning is noteworthy. This result is especially encouraging given that the first year of the project had to proceed with only a part-time project director rather than a permanent director for the Center and project leader.

Having acquired both momentum for the ideas and a permanent project administrator, we are optimistic about the future and the impact of these pilot projects. At this point we have not yet exhausted the monies allocated for the first year. (See attached Budget Summary Deb?) Obviously, several factors account for this. First, the start date of the grant award was somewhat later than anticipated, allowing for less time to prepare for fall activities. Nevertheless, the initial activities proceeded in a reasonably timely fashion. In addition, at the time of application, the College was completing a search for a director for the Center, who was to serve as project director. The search was unsuccessful, and a part-time external consultant (interim project director) had to be retained. Fortunately, the Faculty Development Committee was also able to take on many of the tasks that were critical to getting the project started and keeping it on track throughout the academic year 2001-2002. Despite these obstacles, we are delighted with the progress to date. A beginning basis for a new way of doing business has been initiated.

Further, in August 2002 Diane M. Enerson (see attached vita) joined the Nazareth Community as full-time founding director for the Center for Teaching Excellence. In addition to planning for and launching several other initiatives, Dr. Enerson has been interviewing and surveying the circle participants. She has recently reconvened last year's circles, and is working with faculty within the community to develop at least two new

circles and establishing some peer coaching activities. Although the transition has caused a small lag in the timeframe, we anticipate that all activities will be carried out at least at the level of the original proposal. Dr. Enerson brings with her considerable experience in faculty development, especially that which works from a democratic model and thus fosters community by building on the existing strengths. We look forward to her leadership on the larger scale but also with regards to further implementation and expansion of this project. She will be contact person for the project for the remaining two years.