

**FACULTY COLLABORATIVES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING
NAZARETH COLLEGE OF ROCHESTER**

FINAL REPORT

The primary long-term goal of the Faculty Collaborative Project was to shift the faculty development paradigm at Nazareth College from one-time workshops and seminars to sustained collegial dialogues. This project took as its starting point a notion of faculty development that revolved not around pre-established issues or preset agendas but around the creation of faculty discussion groups (i.e., teaching circles) that were rooted in the liberal arts tradition of a democratic process via collegial discourse. Each teaching circle group had the responsibility of framing a question or series of questions that they then agreed to pursue via collaborative group process and shared discovery. Focal problems were negotiated by the group and meant to address perceived faculty needs. Faculty then met in a series of discussions (typically 3-4 times per semester) aimed at exploring their identified problems. Group size ranged from 3-12, most of which were interdisciplinary in composition. The hope was that creating these opportunities for collegial and open discussion would lead to the growth and enrichment of individual faculty members.

As has been noted in our earlier reports, the response to this project has been exceedingly positive. Both the number of faculty involved and the number of groups that formed has risen to more than double the figures originally predicted. More than two thirds (N=100; 70.4%) of the fulltime faculty at Nazareth participated in at least one of the 32 ongoing discussion groups that were established, many of which have expressed an interest in continuing. (The original proposal estimated that roughly 35-40 individuals would be involved in 7-9 different teaching circle discussion groups over the duration of the project.).

Faculty who participate note there are many benefits of doing so. They report that the circle discussions are challenging intellectually while providing support and practical inspiration. Many have also reported these discussion have had a broad and often surprising impact on their lives as faculty members and as teachers. In our most recent survey of circle participants, in fact, 73.3% agreed that the circle discussion had had an impact that reached beyond the discussions themselves. Their explanations for “how,” make it clear just how important the creation of these groups may have been, not just to the individuals but also to the community as a whole.

“Teaching circle discussions foster a sense of community, reminding us that no one has all the answers, and that the answers themselves, like the questions, continually evolve and change.”

“I have found that there is greater commonality between how we interact with our students and the ways in which we teach.”

“I feel a greater sense of community within the faculty through these circles. It is rewarding to get together, to discuss, debate, and laugh with others.”

“In the Social Justice Circle, I talk with people I would not usually have time to interact with, on subjects that we wouldn’t take the time to discuss otherwise. It has added great richness to my understanding of learning and social implications of our profession.”

“It has created an arena for us to dream together, the dreams we each had separately. The connections that occur between faculty in these circles enhance our ability to work together on other teams and committees.”

“It is hard to pinpoint a causal relationship. I was involved in far too many “firsts” at the time. However, it is clear to me that New Faculty Orientation and the ongoing discussion circle certainly was the only experience that established and solidified cross-discipline relationships and communication from the beginning.”

“My interactions with others have become somewhat more collaborative and consensual.”

“The circle helps to develop strong ties of integrated professional development and collegial work.”

“We were able to support each other’s efforts. For colleagues who were nervous regarding the new technology, we were able to help and support them.”

“I am gaining a clearer picture of the faculty role and teaching methods used by liberal arts faculty that health science folks don’t often observe or hear. I’m finding more similarities in our perceptions of student’s capacities and productivity than I previously knew.”

“I have thought about ways to introduce the interdisciplinary nature of my discipline into many of my courses. We have also established a sense of trust among the people participating in our circle and serve as mentors for each other.”

Further, when asked whether (and how) their approach to teaching had changed as a result of participating in a teaching circle, roughly half gave responses suggesting the changes they had made may have a lasting and significant effect on what they do in the classroom. Many of these changes seem to mirror the structure of the teaching circles themselves such as:

“Listening to student’s voices more often.”

“Trying to get the student to ‘go beyond sound bites’ in their classroom dialogues and begin to reflect on what they are experiencing and how this will make a difference in their personal lives and career.”

“Looking for more creative ways to encourage dialogue, maybe to practice questioning in the classroom.”

“The entire curriculum [in our division] has become more cohesive and unified.”

“Being better able to create learning opportunities that engage students in learning.”

“Trying other means of teaching besides the typical lecture format, as well as collecting more student feedback throughout the semester.”

“Becoming more collaborative and consensual.”

“Being more interested in and sensitive to the language that I use to try to help my students come to new understandings.”

“Understanding the concept of liberal art education better. Having a better grasp of the college as a community of scholars gives me more confidence when I teach.”

Several of the circles—especially those involving new faculty—have also become the starting point for peer mentoring and coaching. And new groups often arise from the discoveries of a previous group. Informal recommendations to “create a circle” have become increasingly commonplace at Nazareth. The format of the teaching circle seems to be gradually becoming institutionalized, as is the case with our recently revised New Faculty Orientation (which is coordinated through the Center for Teaching Excellence), where the early data from the Faculty Collaborative Project provided the feedback that was needed to radically revise a traditional (i.e., talking heads/information dump) orientation program to one involving a yearlong series of discussions that allow for greater interaction and integration into the community (see <http://www.naz.edu/dept/cte/newfaculty/index.htm>).

When asked about the value of these discussions, new faculty report that the formal Orientation, along with the voluntary ongoing New Faculty Teaching Circle (which is facilitated by the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence), continues to serve as a vehicle for helping them make good use of the resources available at Nazareth while making discoveries about themselves as people and as teachers. That nearly the entire cohort of new faculty who began two years ago continued to meet regularly as a group three semesters after their formal orientation ended (and plan to during the coming year) says much about the value of these discussions. And when asked what was the most significant outcome of their participation in the Orientation and in the ongoing circle discussion, the answers of these new faculty, like those of their colleagues, are compelling and reveal how crucial the collegiality and structure of these groups have been.

“We have formed a solid group that will continue to discuss teaching and learning. This opportunity for sustained discussion, as opposed to a single workshop or presentation, provides an opportunity to significantly impact my teaching practice. “

“The ability to develop a deeper, principled understanding with my colleagues rather than in isolation.”

“Participating in the circle provided me with an awareness of the commonalities across disciplines/schools here at Nazareth, an awareness of Nazareth culture and an interest in additional similar experiences.”

“Motivation to do more such collaborations.”

”Identifying strategies and techniques to produce desirable student learning outcomes while fostering a sense of community among them.”

“The New Faculty Circle was a great help in introducing me to Nazareth College, with all of its ins-and-outs, where I didn’t have to worry about offending my immediate colleagues and administrators.”

“I have been able to meet faculty members outside of my department and talk with them in a meaningful way.”

“They provide an opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue and mutual support, and the development of friendships outside of the college that has lasting value. Exposure to thinking and talking about teaching is also energizing.”

“I have grown as a teacher, and remain curious and excited about teaching. Not always easy given the many demands on our time. I think the circles help overcome burnout.”

Not surprisingly, many of these discussions—even those not directly aimed at doing so—have also become the catalyst for course improvements. Because funding for small instructional grants was also part of the Faculty Collaborative Project, many faculty have been able to move forward with some interesting course innovation and improvement ideas. Obviously, not every circle participant has felt the need to take advantage of these course improvement grants, but all have reported that knowing the opportunity was there has been important. A total of forty-five course improvement projects, in fact, were funded overall, 17 during the past year alone.

Faculty who completed a course improvement innovation project uniformly have reported improved student learning. In a recent survey of those who received innovation grants during 2003-2004, in fact, nearly all (90.1%) note that the project was completed as expected. All of these report an observable impact on their students, including: an increased interest in the subject matter (72.7%); easier mastery of difficult conceptual

material (27.3%); and students taking a more active role in class (27.3%). While many faculty note that it has been more work than expected, the overwhelming majority (90.9%) report that a logical next step for them will be to expand on, continue to develop, or make improvements to their course projects, with just over half (54.5%) indicating that they expect the completed work will result in a report or public presentation. Finally, when grant recipients are asked about the number of students affected annually by the course improvements they have made, the numbers are impressive. A cumulative estimate for the number of students affected by the improvement and innovation grants awarded between 2002-2004 is between 2,800 and 3,300, roughly 1 – 1 ½ times the undergraduate enrollment at Nazareth.

Clearly, the focus for all of those who have participated in the Faculty Collaborative Project—at whatever level they have participated—has not been simply on “finding answers” but on a process of learning and discovery, a process that lies at the heart of a liberal arts education. Faculty have joined these discussions not so much looking for answers as looking for new ways to consider the problem and because they were seeking new contexts for doing so. And they continue to join because discussions have become “a place in my life for both scholarly discussion and peer support.”

Much has been made in recent years about “what we know about learning.” In the wake of these discoveries, faculty are often admonished to apply this considerable knowledge to their classroom. Ironically, we only rarely offer faculty programs to nurture their own learning process that involves the kinds of learning conditions they are expected to create for their students. Yet, if we are to capitalize on what we have learned about learning in the past few decades, then the models we use to provide faculty opportunities to grow must also make use of those recent discoveries. The teaching circle discussion groups organized throughout this project seem to do just that. By setting their own agendas, faculty have been able to create collegial and democratic learning experiences that serve as an effective context for learning from others, self-reflection, and as a useful model for new ways of being in the classroom.

Clearly, we have surpassed our original goals for faculty involvement and student learning. Individual faculty have participated and made commitments in numbers far higher than estimated. The notion of ongoing and sustained dialogue as a viable faculty development process has begun to take a firm foothold at Nazareth College. And while the process of peer coaching has not developed as a separate process, it has moved forward as an epiphenomena of the ongoing teaching circle discussions. Thus, it is only in the matter of faculty involvement as assessment leaders that progress has been less than originally predicted. As was noted in an earlier report, Nazareth College faculty did, as planned, explore the model for assessment provided by the Alverno College. They found it to be a compelling one but not a useful one. Consequently, they have spent time searching for an alternative assessment model through participation at national and local conferences. Although a clear and consensual model has not yet emerged, we do have a better sense of the options. Through these efforts it has become increasingly clear that as an institution, assessment is not yet an area of strength. We are working on it but have a long way to go. Our explorations and conversations as part of the Faculty

Collaborative Project have been a crucial part of that discovery.

One final important outcome of the Faculty Collaborative Project has been that the Center for Teaching Excellence (which was founded in tandem with the Faculty Collaborative Project), now has a well-established identity that is focused less on the promotion of one-time events and workshops than on creating occasions for groups of faculty (or even groups of students and faculty) to learn from others in sustained, ongoing, and productive ways. We expect to build on these successes in the years ahead. This year, for example, we will begin instituting a departmental peer mentoring process that complements the interdisciplinary mentoring and peer mentoring that is already a part of the revised New Faculty Orientation. We will work further with those who completed the innovation projects in looking for ways to expand them. We will continue to sponsor and support ongoing teaching circle discussion groups as well as look for new ways to expand those discussions to include students and staff. The power of these kinds of ongoing discussions to build community has become clear.

During the past several years, Nazareth College has been in the midst of a significant process of expansion and change. As we have started to grow, there has been concern that our sense of community might suffer. But it has also become increasingly clear that ongoing discussions such as those created with the teaching circles have had and will continue to have considerable power to rebuild that community. In many ways, the Faculty Collaborative Project has been a rare but rich opportunity. Most Centers of Teaching Excellence begin with a mandate to inform and instruct, to fix something specific that is perceived to be wrong. We feel fortunate to have been able to begin differently. By having our initial focus be on creating contexts for exploration and discovery, by having the necessary resources to experiment and take risks, the result may have been to set new precedents that ultimately could have an institutional impact, not merely a collection of individual ones.

Although it is hard to determine precisely what constitutes cultural change, many indexes suggest that some level of reform has begun at Nazareth College. The value of this new paradigm for faculty development involving collegial discussion, innovation projects, new forms of assessment, and peer coaching are clear. Maintaining the momentum of the last three years will be an obvious priority for the Center for Teaching Excellence in the coming years. We will continue to build on these successes by supporting established group discussions, exploring new contexts and venues for other types of discussions, and telling our story to others—both internally and externally.