
Cultivating Online Faculty Growth Through Leadership Training

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Abstract

Whether in business or education, leadership should always take steps to prepare employees for increasing responsibilities and future leadership roles. Continuous leadership training helps ensure employees are prepared to lead their classrooms as well as step into future leadership roles with confidence. Cultivating faculty leadership has numerous benefits for not only the faculty involved, but for their students, and ultimately the university as well.

Introduction

When one thinks of traditional faculty development, thoughts are limited to the continued development of the faculty's teaching skills almost exclusively. However, as Kezar, Lester, Carducci, Gallant and McGavin (2007) have pointed out, "while the faculty role has changed over time, leadership has remained critical to innovation in teaching, advances in knowledge, and alteration to many campus policies and practices." In a review of community college faculty, faculty often saw themselves as "lacking innate abilities or not inhabiting formal administrative roles" (Cooper and Pagatto, 2003) and used these assumptions to avoid leadership roles when they were presented. Contrary to those beliefs, rather than not having the ability, faculty may simply not have the training needed to confidently take on these leadership roles. Providing opportunities and encouraging participation in different leadership roles is vital in preparing faculty with the requisite skill-sets, and building self-esteem. Often, new leaders in higher education are promoted from within the faculty ranks given the excellent candidate pool already available. Initially, faculty could take on small leadership roles such as participating on a hiring committee or other university task-force, or by taking on a more formal role (i.e., senate chair).

When discussing the necessary qualities faculty should have when moving into academic leadership roles, there are key leadership characteristics that are widely accepted as the fundamental competencies leaders need regardless of their role or discipline (Acona et. al, 2007; Center for Leadership Change, n.d.; Mathews, 2018; McCurdy, et. al, 2004) including:

- Having a sense of self,
- Creating a vision and articulating what it looks like,
- Being creative and developing new ways to achieve that vision,
- Communicating effectively,
- Analyzing and problem-solving,
- Executing plans with creativity and collaboration,

- Influencing and motivating others,
- Having a high level of integrity, honesty and consistency, and
- Demonstrating a desire to learn.

Many of these competencies can be learned (McCurdy et. al, 2004). Faculty can slowly increase their level of responsibility through a number of activities including the completion of SMART goal setting, taking on department or school-wide projects, conference presentations, training and development opportunities, etc. However, when leaders recognize these positive attributes in their employees, or when faculty express an interest in a leadership role or leadership development, they can work together to further cultivate these skills and begin the process of developing faculty for new opportunities.

Our Team

Purdue University Global (PG) has three distinct groups of faculty members contributing to its mission; part-time adjunct faculty (PT), ‘regular’ full-time faculty (FT), and a position somewhat unique to PG called the ‘full-time adjunct’ faculty (FTA). Part-time adjunct faculty can teach only one or two courses each term. Full-time regular faculty typically teach three courses each term and also have other expectations with respect to scholarship and university service (i.e., committee work, curriculum development, mentoring, etc.). This differs from our FTAs whose sole responsibility is instruction. FTAs can facilitate between three to five sections each term, but without the other expectations that our regular FT faculty have for scholarship and university service. As the name implies, FTAs have the same benefits package as other full-time regular employees. As with all faculty groups, FTAs are also supported in continuing development, faculty governance, and curriculum development as needed (DeKorte et al., 2017). Both the FT regular and FTA faculty have played key roles in increasing our student success rates.

Training

What is it?

In August 2019, PG Science Department leadership presented an option to their three FT and 12 FTA faculty to change the monthly meeting format to include short leadership training sessions at the beginning of each meeting. To encourage faculty buy-in and engagement, faculty were asked to select their own discussion topics. An online resource library called SkillSoft (<https://www.skillsoft.com/>) would be utilized. Some available topics in the Skillsoft library include collaboration, work-life balance, career development, building relationships, oral and written communication, presentation skills, and listening. Session topics could be in assorted formats, such as videos, web articles, or books. Not only can these topics; such as conflict management, be applied in their classrooms, but most can be applied in daily interactions with colleagues, students, and others - allowing them to enhance their professional skill-set.

Process

Faculty were encouraged to select topics of personal interest applicable within the classroom or for further professional growth. Topics from the SkillSoft Library were submitted via a Google form. The Google form collected information including:

1. Topic or title,
2. General category (e.g., communication skills),
3. Brief overview and description of topic / resource,
4. Format (e.g., video, book chapter) and length (e.g., 3 min video, 12 page chapter), and
5. Any other relevant topic information.

Approximately one week prior to meeting, one to two faculty-selected topics were forwarded to the group with accompanying resources. This allowed time to review the materials, reflect, and prepare for the discussion. Meetings were held monthly in a virtual Google Meet session providing flexibility regarding preference of using the video camera, no camera, or by calling in via phone. The Department Chair or Assistant Chair opened the meeting by presenting the topic(s) for discussion again. To facilitate an active and engaged discussion, question prompts on the topic(s) were given as needed, with the expectation that faculty would be encouraged to take the discussion's lead.

Results

Google Survey - Preliminary Results

Five months following the initial leadership training, a Google survey was sent to all 15 FT and FTA faculty in order to discern how effective the implementation of the leadership training had been to date. The Google survey contained nine questions and an area to provide additional feedback and comments. The results are as follows:

- 80% said the training met or exceeded their expectations. 20% either had mixed feelings about it or said it had not met expectations.
- 93% said the group size of 15 participants was just right, 6.7% said it was too small.
- 67% rated the quality of the group interaction as either a 4 or 5; very good to excellent, on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent), while 33% thought it was just good (rating of 3).
- 66.7% stated that they learned something new, while 33.3% said that they did not. In their feedback, faculty commented that some of the new skills learned included providing feedback, ways to look at problems differently, stress and time management, as well as the need to conduct personal reflection.
- 80% found that the training was relevant to highly relevant to their needs as an instructor, while only 20% found the training to be only somewhat relevant.
- 60% overwhelmingly agreed to have the leadership training continue when asked if it should be continued in this smaller group setting of 15 participants; followed by 33.3% who were unsure, and 6.7% who said no, it should not. The one individual that said no felt that holding the training during every monthly meeting was too much.
- 87% agreed that including these leadership topics and training would be beneficial to everyone and should be incorporated into the larger faculty meeting where 30-60 FT, FTA, and PT instructors attend monthly.

Faculty Growth

As a result of these training sessions, a significant increase in faculty confidence and engagement has already been noted. One work-life balance discussion held in October 2019 focused on how to best deal with stress. During the discussion, the importance of sleep and the role binaural waves play was reviewed. This discussion led to a faculty-led presentation for the Faculty STEM Journal Club on Sleep Science. Additionally, from other leadership training, faculty volunteered to present elsewhere on several leadership topics discussed during these FT meetings. To date, several faculty-led presentations at the department-wide faculty meeting have been held on topics discussed during training including how to deal with difficult students, and have submitted several proposals to PG's General Education Conference. These opportunities have helped increase faculty confidence and public speaking skills, while promoting collaboration and improving engagement and scholarship.

Faculty have also expressed interest in collaborating with each other in presenting topics for the FT meeting. One pair of faculty members took the initiative to select a topic, date, and corresponding resources for their discussion as part of the training. This is a strong indication that they are engaged and a sign of buy-in from the faculty.

Future Plans

The overwhelmingly positive feedback received has encouraged department leadership to not only modify some areas of the leadership training to improve faculty experience, but also expand the training beyond the FT and FTA faculty meetings currently offered. Those in favor of a larger scale training session included feedback on how to modify the format to better accommodate a larger faculty meeting, including pre-screening topics in the smaller FT and FTA group first, providing the information as a presentation rather than a discussion, and limiting discussion time in order to maintain productive parameters. We will begin to incorporate small training sessions into monthly department-wide faculty meetings, which in addition to our FT and FTA faculty, also include our 60+ PT adjunct faculty. However, due to the number of faculty, we will be mindful to 1) limit the time for discussion to 10-15 min, and 2) only offer them on a quarterly basis initially.

Furthermore, we will also use the suggestions made by FT and FTA faculty to include additional external resources including short TED Talks, etc. that are available on numerous topics. Some requested topics for future meetings included time management, strategies for student motivation, dealing with disgruntled students, and disagreeing without being disagreeable. These topics would continue to improve leadership skills both inside and outside of the classroom. We will continue to encourage faculty to present on the topics discussed during meetings at conferences and to apply them when working with students, colleagues, and others. Finally, in addition to having the FT and FTA faculty participate in the discussions, we will begin having them lead these training sessions as well.

Conclusion

Faculty development is critical and does not have to require a lot of time and money. Leadership has the ability to help develop future leaders starting with their own faculty. Leadership training sessions that incorporate faculty-led discussions that utilize various forms of resources can provide opportunities for faculty to acquire stronger leadership skills both inside and outside the classroom. Allowing faculty to lead the sessions and choose the topic can result in faculty buy-in and engagement. Attention must be given to the size of the group to ensure its effectiveness. When leadership makes the effort to ensure that faculty are fully prepared for future leadership roles or increasing responsibility, it benefits students, the department, and the university.

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