

Evolving Faculty Development at Ithaca College

Report to Provost Kathleen Rountree and
Associate Provost David Garcia

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Introduction

Building on the foundation it has laid over the last twenty years, Ithaca College is poised to take its faculty development to the next level. This effort constitutes a response to needs expressed by faculty as well as the recognition that, without a physical faculty development center, Ithaca College lags behind most of its peer institutions. There is broad support within the community at all levels (e.g., Faculty, Department Heads, Deans, Associate Deans) for moving from a “virtual” faculty development presence to a real center with dedicated space and dedicated full time staff. As articulated in the Morgan (2005) report titled “Faculty Development at Ithaca College in Perspective,” there are many advantages to a real center, both general and specific to Ithaca College (p. 3; pp. 11-12).

The Ground Work

As discussed in Morgan (2005) and by many of the individuals I spoke with during my visit, the history of faculty development at Ithaca College begins in the 1980s in the form of Spilios Stamas, whose work focused on visiting new faculty members’ classrooms and providing feedback. Several senior faculty members with whom I interacted spoke very highly of Stamas and the impact his work had on their teaching. This position was eliminated during the downsizing period of the College, and faculty development re-emerged in the mid-1990s as faculty members served in a part-time capacity in rotating three-year terms. In 2003 faculty development evolved a bit with the creation of the virtual Center for Faculty Excellence, aided by Susanne Morgan, who initially worked part-time and (more recently during her combined sabbatical leave) full-time as a faculty developer. Along with this history there also has been support through Summer Research Grants and Instructional Development Grants to support faculty working to improve their courses.

These initiatives have laid the groundwork for the current initiative, as evidenced by the voices of various members of the community with whom I met, who either nostalgically recalled the “good old days” where someone was willing to visit your classroom and provide feedback, or commended more recent initiatives that brought people together across the campus in workshops and talks. However, despite perceiving a need for faculty development, some faculty members are skeptical about the institution’s commitment to making it happen.

Current Need

Many people with whom I met clearly indicated a number of factors that speak to the need for a strong faculty development center on campus. These include changing student demographics (accompanied by a new set of assumptions on the parts of students about their own roles and those of faculty), changing expectations in the disciplines, an increased interest in interdisciplinarity, and the expectation of a large turnover of faculty in the near future. Similarly, some individuals relished the idea of having someone to help them address problems/challenges they are currently experiencing, while others mentioned the attractiveness of having greater support for educational innovation. Still others discussed educational “movements” afoot (such as experiential learning, service learning, or problem-based learning) that they would like to explore with the benefit of the expertise of faculty development center staff.

Deans, department heads and faculty all mentioned a variety of faculty development efforts going on at the College in an informal or decentralized way, e.g., peers visiting classes, grants for attending teaching-related conferences. But most individuals recognized the advantages of centralizing this type of support so that it would be available to all Ithaca College faculty and not determined by the School one is in; it would allow conversations and learning across disciplines; it would help to create a community of educators and move teaching away from being a “loner sport;” and it would assure equal access to high quality information about learning and all it entails.

A Process for Moving Forward

In moving forward, I would recommend a self-reflective decision-making process for the College, some of which is introduced and discussed in the Morgan (2005) report. I will outline the process I have in mind, and expand on issues where I heard a convergence across groups.

1. **Define what you mean by “faculty development”** (see Morgan 2005, p. 5). Will the focus be on individual faculty members, on course and curriculum development, on organizational development, or some combination of the above? During my visit I heard the need for all three components of faculty development expressed by individuals in different roles, and it should be noted that *the most effective centers* around the country define faculty development in the broadest sense to include all three components. [You may need to prioritize the focus initially if you start small and build up the Center over time, which I discuss later in this document.]
2. **Articulate the culture of the institution and align the Center with that culture.** It is imperative to align the faculty development center with aspects of the culture that will help it to be successful and eventually embed it solidly into the College.¹ It is equally important to align the Center with the mission and strategic/institutional plan of the College to assure that it also addresses expressed sentiments and needs.
3. **Secure “buy-in” at all levels.** It is clear from the time I spent at Ithaca College that you have broad-based buy-in from individuals at all levels (e.g., junior and senior faculty, administrators at the School level). However, it is always important to do a needs assessment to assure that you hear from those who haven’t previously been involved in faculty development at the college, have expectations for such a center based on previous experience, or have specific needs.
4. **Articulate the rationale behind the Center.** Faculty and administrators alike want to know the reasoning behind the creation of the Center, its philosophy, its focus, the model of staffing, etc.² Any center should be continually driven by faculty needs, and this should always be explicitly stated. The Center should also promise confidentiality to faculty as one of its underlying premises; the faculty must be assured that the Center staff will never divulge any information (from faculty consultations, classroom observations, student focus groups, etc.) to anyone but the faculty member him/herself.
5. **Outline goals.** What are your long-term goals for the Center? Do you want to impact the curriculum as well as courses and classroom teaching? Do you want to eventually change the culture so that teaching is more fully understood as a complex and sophisticated, in other words ‘scholarly’, endeavor? Do you want to focus on new faculty or support faculty across career stages, or both? Do you want to focus on “remediation” or innovation in teaching, or both?
6. **Acknowledge what the Center is not.** If the Center is to gain the trust and respect of the faculty, it is imperative to separate the formative feedback the Center provides to faculty from summative evaluation used in promotion and tenure. It is also important to educate faculty at a deep level

¹ For example, at Carnegie Mellon (CM) we conducted focus groups and interviews with faculty, department heads and deans, and identified the following aspects of the culture as relevant: (1) It is a research culture driven by data; (2) the faculty have an entrepreneurial spirit and risk-taking attitude; (3) the faculty are busy and place a premium on time; (4) there is a highly decentralized administrative structure; (5) there are many very distinct disciplinary subcultures; and (6) there is a small university feel where business happens through personal connections. All of these aspects informed the creation and evolution of the Center.

² At CM our rationale was that, in order to teach well, our colleagues need to understand how people learn because [as our colleague Herbert S. Simon said] “*learning results from what the student does and thinks and only from what the student does and thinks. The teacher can advance learning only by influencing what the student does to learn.*” So our focus has been on educating faculty about the learning sciences [not dispensing tips and strategies] and using that information to inform the design of curriculum, courses, learning experiences and classroom pedagogy.

about learning, *not* simply to dispense tips and strategies (because quick fixes and decontextualized strategies do not translate across contexts).³

7. **Decide who will “staff” the Center.** Some centers hire full time professionals from outside the institution, others use full-time faculty with an interest and the skills and abilities to do the work, while others use a rotating faculty model. The decision around staffing should align with the culture of the institution.⁴ While there are advantages and disadvantages of all of these staffing models, in my 27 years in the field I believe the strongest programs have professional staff dedicated to faculty development. Almost everyone I spoke with at Ithaca College agreed that the staff needed to have Ph.D.s in academic disciplines, be respected among the faculty, and have “proven” themselves as solid academics⁵ – however, there was some disagreement about whether the person/people should be internal or external.
8. **Find a space.** Even if the Center begins modestly, with one office, a dedicated space indicates commitment by the institution. In the best of all worlds, the space would be visible to faculty and located in a place that faculty walk by and see on a daily basis. Given the cynicism of some community members around the institution’s commitment to faculty development, this issue becomes even more important.
9. **Decide how you will meet your goals programmatically.** For example, workshops and seminars help to build community, share research on learning, and show faculty the possibilities of new pedagogical approaches. Individual consultations change behavior because the Center staff can “customize” discussions and advice to individual faculty member’s style of teaching, course size and goals, discipline, etc. Most centers blend the two types of activities, along with other activities (e.g., orientations, small grants, publications).
10. **Assure that research on learning permeates the Center.** The learning sciences provide a lot of solid research that faculty can use as we design courses, learning experiences and classroom pedagogy. Center staff can bridge the gap between research articles that provide in-depth discussion of the mechanisms of learning and teaching guides that provide action-oriented strategies for course design and classroom pedagogy.⁶ In this way we can *educate* our colleagues as they continue to develop as teachers.
11. **Delineate who will define key aspects of the Center and how.** Will there be an advisory committee of faculty who will help determine the priorities of the Center? What role will department heads and deans play?⁷

³ To see how we articulated this at CM, I have attached a two-page document that we distribute to our faculty each year.

⁴ At CM we were strongly advised during our needs assessment phase to hire people with Ph.D.s in disciplines that we have represented on campus (we do not have a school of education, for example), and that these staff members should all engage in teaching, research, publishing, grant-writing, and committee work so that they are viewed as colleagues by the faculty. This was important given our culture; these are not necessarily traits that are important at other institutions.

⁵ While clearly there is a knowledge base that the professional staff should have (e.g., learning sciences research, student development research), it can be acquired by an academic with a Ph.D. What is equally important are the skill set (e.g., ability to integrate different knowledge bases to address a challenge/problem; ability to adapt to different disciplines; problem-solving orientation; strong communication skills, particularly questioning skills) and personal attributes (e.g., non-judgmental, confident, collaborative, flexible, energetic) necessary to function effectively in this position.

⁶ As an example, I have attached a set of eight theory- and research-based principles of learning that form the basis of the research we use in our work at the Eberly Center.

⁷ At CM we have always had an Advisory Committee of key senior faculty who help us to prioritize our goals. We also survey our faculty both formally (every few years) and informally (on a daily basis) to assure we continually address their needs. We meet with department heads and deans as a group once a year, and individually every two-three years (this was more frequent the first seven years, when we were getting established).

12. **Determine how you will gather feedback to monitor and assess success of the Center.** These are two different animals: one is formative (to improve the quality of the programs) while the other is summative (to determine if the program is meeting its goals). While the first is relatively easy (i.e., faculty are always helpful in providing feedback about what's not working, what they'd like to see), the second can be more difficult because the nature of the interactions with faculty colleagues should be confidential (except, of course, for public forums like workshops and seminars).⁸ The Provost, Associate Provost and Center Director, in conjunction with the faculty advisory committee, should determine what would constitute "success" of the Center and how you will measure that.
13. **Determine how to interact with other entities involved in faculty and student support.** For example, support staff working with faculty to integrate technology into their courses should be closely linked to the faculty developers to assure that an educational need/problem/challenge/gap is driving the integration of new technologies and that research on learning is supporting the endeavor. Also, since a lot of faculty development work focuses on helping faculty help students develop the metacognitive skills and other skills and abilities that students are lacking, the faculty developers should work closely with the student support people who provide tutoring in subject areas or on academic skills, to assure consistency in the message students are hearing from both groups (i.e., faculty and student support personnel). Similarly, assessment people and faculty developers should be closely linked because it's not enough to assess and find out what's not working and where students are deficient; faculty then need to revise/revamp courses, pedagogy, etc. In the best of all worlds, these four entities (i.e., faculty development, assessment, technology support for education, learning support for students) would be a part of the same center; minimally they could be effectively linked in either reporting to the same person or housed in close proximity to one another to assure continual contact. Clearly members of the community saw the importance of linking faculty development and assessment as well as faculty development and technology, as several individuals mentioned this during my visit.

Thoughtful advance consideration of the above issues should position the Center for success. I would encourage the college to take the time to think through all of these aspects carefully before moving to the next stage of evolution.

Concerns

There were a few concerns voiced by members of the community that should be addressed as you evolve faculty development at Ithaca College. Some of these I've already mentioned, but it is worth listing them again.

- **Cost:** A few people are concerned with the cost of such a program versus the benefit the college will accrue. My experience is that it is always worthwhile to start modestly in order to build trust, credibility and confidence in the Center's staff, and expand if and when the need arises. As such, cost could be "minimal", i.e., one full time professional, part-time administrative help, an office, and a small budget for materials, conferences, etc.
- **Skepticism:** A few individuals voiced concern that "at this place there is always a lot of discussion but nothing ever happens." When asked how the Provost could signal her commitment to faculty development, the response was uniformly: by providing a full time person and space.

⁸ At CM we only report the number of faculty and graduate students we serve, broken down by "service" (e.g., workshops/seminars, individual consultation), level (e.g., junior or senior faculty) and college (e.g., engineering, fine arts, science, computer science). Recently we began reporting contact hours since our emphasis is on individual consultation and those take a lot of time (but the pay-off is enormous). We do have "before" and "after" documentation that faculty have, on occasion, given us permission to share with the Provost, but none of the three Provosts I have worked for have ever asked for it; they believe that if their faculty continue to come to the Center we must be adding value.

- **Blurring of Formative and Summative Assessment:** While many people didn't use those terms (only one person did), there were questions about the role of the Center in peer review for promotion and tenure. I want to reinforce my point that the Center **SHOULD NOT** be involved in summative evaluation (judgment of quality of teaching for promotion and tenure); rather the role of the Center should be to help the faculty improve (formative feedback) through developing more effective courses, learning experiences and classroom pedagogy. Centers that have tried to combine the two have not been successful: faculty experiencing a problem or challenge will simply not come to a center if they believe the staff could have a negative impact on their future.

Conclusion

I will end this report the way I began it – the time is right, the groundwork has been laid, and the College is ready to move forward and commit to a physical presence for a Center for Faculty Excellence.

