



“The Times They Are A-Changing:” Faculty Support Mechanisms in a Shifting Academic Landscape

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The Drexel Center for Academic Excellence (DCAE) opened its doors in August 2005. While funded through the provost’s office, the center is an independent entity committed to providing a variety of services to Drexel faculty that can enhance and expand their academic and professional activities. The DCAE works with individuals, faculty cohorts, departments, and other academic units by eliciting suggestions for programs that meet special needs as well as providing programs typical of such faculty development centers nationally. It also sponsors attendance at relevant conferences and gives some support to faculty who wish to develop the scholarship of teaching and learning. In addition, speakers on topics of interest are brought to campus, as are facilitators for activities such as portfolio development. The DCAE—while a centralized, university-wide operation—collaborates with other units within the university who are providing more localized programs for their faculty.

Key goals and objectives of the DCAE revolve around the provision of opportunities for the faculty to work individually and collectively to:

- Examine some of the critical challenges of teaching and learning in the twenty-first century
- Expand and maintain the creation and development of knowledge
- Translate and transmit that knowledge to students in increasingly effective ways

- Recognize and respond to the impact on faculty and student interactions brought about by the increasing use of technology in the classroom
- Assist faculty in accommodating and productively responding to career paths and career life cycles during a period of rapid change, shifting expectations and sometimes-conflicting demands

Redefinition of Changing Expectations

As a center, the DCAE needs to deliver its services within a context of greater variability in faculty categories, roles and rewards. At Drexel University, as in many other institutions of higher education, there are a number of full-time, non-tenure-track positions that increasingly coexist with the traditional tenure-track positions. While the career trajectories for these groups vary, as do some performance criteria, many of the concerns that relate to classroom management and student learning are strikingly similar. For both groups, expectations may undergo frequent redefinition reflecting changing expectations within disciplines, in the university, in the academic community at large, and among stakeholders both internally and externally.

These changes affect not only new faculty but also those who have moved into midcareer and late-career stages. The age range among faculty is a factor relatively unique in the history of the academy and in some instances provides a span of forty or more years



of very divergent experiences, goals, and perspectives about higher education.

New policies and procedures, more diverse faculty and students, rapidly changing technology, and altered expectations about performance criteria may overwhelm faculty seeking to strike a balance between course content and the process of teaching for learning. In addition, colleges and universities are facing greater variations in student levels of preparation and an enlarged awareness and need to be responsive to different student learning styles. Faculty at all levels find themselves searching for commonalities, more dialogue about issues and a desire for an academic community that may be difficult to achieve without support structures.

The Drexel Center for Academic Excellence operates to provide faculty with information and with a variety of programs that not only give knowledge and skills but that also assist in establishing both formal and informal contacts among faculty and between faculty and administrators. In the first year of operation, the DCAE offered an intense two-day introduction to the structure and culture of the university to new full-time faculty, which was the followed by a yearlong series of workshops on issues like grading, dealing with students with alternative needs, and balancing conflicting demands for teaching, research, and service. The DCAE also began a series of brown-bag lunches open to all faculty with informal topical discussions—but most importantly, with opportunities for faculty from different units and with differ-

ent experiences to interact and network. The brown bags also were designed as a forum for junior, midcareer, and senior faculty to share their concerns and collaborate on effective problem solving. It should be noted that all these activities were and continue to be voluntary for participants. Every session included an assessment or feedback form that was used in the planning for subsequent activities.

Shifting Career Goals

In reviewing the assessment of the activities of the first year, it became clear that we needed to recognize that “new” is a relative term and that one size will not fit all so designated. It also became apparent that many long-term faculty had shifting career goals and also found some of the changes to an expanding university and an enlarging and more diverse student population to be challenging. This encouraged us to open the topical workshops to all faculty.

For example, when we looked at the assessments of the initial orientation for new faculty, it was very clear that only some were actually new to teaching at the post-secondary level with full classroom management responsibility. Others had taught elsewhere or at our university as part-timers. Still others were making a midlife career change from outside of the academy to college teaching. While all were full time, some were on the tenure track while others were on contracts. Thus, certain parts of the two-day program clearly had different meanings and applicability for the diverse partici-

pants. Accordingly, we structured the orientation for the following year with concurrent sessions that addressed some of the subgroups and gave individuals the opportunity to select those activities that they felt were most meaningful.

In addition, conversations with some long-term faculty indicated that while they appreciated the informal discussion-oriented brown bags, they also wanted to be able to attend the more formal topical panels and workshops. Thus, in the second year, all the workshops after the orientation were opened to all interested faculty. This has the added benefit of providing opportunities for interaction between those relatively new to Drexel University and those who have been here for several years. The activities of the second year continued the activities of the first year, with some topics recurring and others added in response to the assessment feedback gathered.

The DCAE has also brought nationally known experts to campus for workshops and open forums. These activities have been highly useful for faculty,





department heads, and deans, as outside speakers generally set what we are doing locally within a national context. In this same category of enrichment, we also have supported the attendance and participation of faculty at offsite conferences where the focus was on issues of teaching in higher education. This type of exposure enabled networking as well as engagement in the scholarship of teaching. Since most of this participation has involved small groups, a core of faculty has worked together to bring the information that they acquired back to Drexel.

A major enrichment activity that was initiated prior to the formal creation of the DCAE but continued and expanded by the university involves portfolio workshops. These provide opportunities for individual reflection and benefit individual faculty, our students, and the institution. Last year, in addition to the portfolios designed for teaching, we initiated and held a professional/leadership portfolio workshop for senior faculty. This workshop received positive assessment and will be repeated in 2008.

We also work with what we call an on-demand service with individual clients, assisting them in self-analysis of their teaching techniques. This service is totally confidential and provides an option for individual faculty to discuss their teaching and other professional concerns in a formative context.

In our third year, we have expanded our outreach to faculty, departments, and units by our willingness to customize services to meet their emerging needs. As

a result, we are involved in working with several departments on establishing collaborative peer review processes that reflect the specific and varied requirements of diverse groups. In the process of this work, we have become increasingly aware of concerns about two issues that are also reflected in national conferences. One of these involves issues of what faculty perceive as student incivility, while the other—possibly related—issue questions how to teach “millennial” students. As these are issues that concern faculty nationally, the staff of the center is disseminating information through topical discussions with faculty and will bring guest workshop facilitators to campus to explore effective ways to engage this new student population and promote their learning.

There are challenges that our center faces, as do many others. University faculty have a number of professional and personal obligations and face continual and competing demands on their time. Scheduling meetings that can engage more than those who are already involved in enhancing their teaching in ways that they find meaningful requires a great deal of effort. While there is no one best time, a midday lunch arrangement seems to work better for us than late afternoon. The university does not have any open period when all faculty are free.

Creating Positive Teaching and Learning Situations

We must continue to demonstrate the importance of creating the most positive

teaching and learning situations that are rewarding to faculty and beneficial to students. We need to assist faculty within a research university to feel that good and innovative teaching is important. One of our efforts here has been to use the DCAE Web site to showcase the profiles of our teaching award winners along with their personal statements of what teaching means to them. Since Drexel University gives such awards to faculty representing all levels, this enables us to demonstrate in a cost-effective way the promotion and attainment of teaching excellence. We are also using our Web site to post a written guide on teaching tips, which is available to all faculty.

It is apparent to us that our faculty development center cannot be static. It must be responsive to what is happening outside of the university, to the changing requirements and expectations of the university and its varied constituents. It needs to create a viable feedback loop that is flexible, receptive to innovation and empowering for faculty teaching in the twenty-first century. ■

References

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