Higher Education’s “Dirty Little Secret” and Doing Something About It

www.fgcu.edu/LucasCenter

Dr. Ronald B. Toll
Florida Gulf Coast University
Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs
rtoll@fgcu.edu

Dr. Linda Serro
Florida Gulf Coast University
Professor of Curriculum & Instruction
Director, Lucas Center for Faculty Development
lserro@fgcu.edu

Dr. Senthil (BeeJay) Girimurugan
Florida Gulf Coast University
Assistant Professor, Department of Mathematics
sgirimurugan@fgcu.edu

Roundtable Outcomes:
1. Understanding the “Dirty Little Secret” problem and its impact on student-centered teaching, learning and assessment
2. Description of a model of faculty development based upon evidence-based practices
3. Plan to implement an intense, mandated experience for new faculty
4. List of issues to address when planning new faculty experiences
5. Overview of topics covered in Academy
6. Insight into the impact on student learning and faculty success
7. Suggestions for developing similar programs

The Dirty Little Secret. For nearly all skill-based professions, some basal proficiencies related to the central responsibility of those positions are required. Therein lies the “Dirty Little Secret” of higher education: we are the only profession, white or blue collar, which hires entry-level practitioners based on skills largely unassociated with their primary responsibilities. We hire entry-level faculty, whose duties are primarily directed toward instruction, but they have little if any prior experience. The underlying, erroneous mythology of the “Dirty Little Secret” suggests that successful students are successful teachers. We have aggressively tackled the “Dirty Little Secret” with a campus-wide approach. The Provost publically acknowledged the “Secret”, supported the development of the Faculty Academy, and provided leadership and resources to embrace and advance the AAC&U equity imperative through faculty innovation in student-centered teaching, learning and assessment.
Curriculum Development. A group of faculty representing all five colleges gathered topics by asking peers what they wished they had known about pedagogy in their first year. Topics were sorted, those dealing with disciplinary issues discarded, and the remaining ones prioritized with emphasis on reflective pedagogy and finding joy and success in the classroom. A semester long course emerged, comprising six units of study delivered through evidence-based, active learning practices including discussion, modeling, problem-solving and reflection.


Course Units:

I. Designing a Course
II. Teaching Strategies
III. Working with Students
IV. Sense of Place
V. Assessing Learning
VI. My Academic Life

Learning Activities:

Assigned Readings. The “text” for the Academy is What the Best College Teachers Do by Ken Bain. This book was the basis for the journal entries and the class discussions.

Technology Minutes. Most weeks one of the e-learning instructional designers share a technology tip related to the content of the day.

Teaching Philosophy. The topics we cover over the semester will help participants to build a teaching philosophy about learning and their role in that process. They write a draft and we will revisit that draft over the semester to revise as their knowledge, skills and beliefs change.

Journal. Reflection on practice is the heart of this Academy. On a regular basis you will be asked to reflect on some aspect of teaching, learning, assessment, students, your responsibilities, etc. Journal entries will be used as starting points for class discussions.

Lesson Plan. Following our discussion of various ways to lesson plan, participants will write a plan for one of their courses, share the plan in a small group setting, and submit for feedback from the instructor.

Course “Big Ideas”. For one of their courses, they identify 2 – 3 big ideas for the course. From those ideas, they develop a set of student learning outcomes related to those ideas and write a reflection paper on the process.

Mid-term Survey Protocol. Participants develop a mid-term survey of learning, perceptions, and feedback for one of their courses. After they administer the survey, they summarize the results, identify trends, and discuss how they could use the information to improve the course.
Share a Strategy. Participants share with the Academy one new strategy they have tried in one of their courses. They include the course title, enrollment, what you did, how you did it, modifications for the future, and impact on student learning.

Rubric. Participants develop a rubric for one assignment one of their courses. Depending on the assignment chosen, it will be either a holistic or analytic rubric.

Classroom Observations. Participants are given opportunities to see strategies in practice by visiting their mentor coach classes.

Mentor Meetings. Participants work with a mentor who will be available to discuss the topics we are covering, review lesson plans, and provide peer observations of teaching.

Final Project. The final project is a short presentation on the significant learning participants have gained from the New Faculty Academy experience.

Discussion question: How do you treat the “Dirty Little Secret” at your institution?

Unique Characteristic. Participation of all new faculty with less than two years of full-time collegiate experience was mandatory. Teaching/graduate assistantships and visiting/adjunct positions were discounted. Faculty enrolled in the Academy had no service obligations during that semester. The faculty union was supportive of these conditions and the overall enterprise.

Discussion question: Do you have a similar program at your institution?

Impact. Two cohorts have completed the Academy successfully. Challenges regarding scheduling and supporting the varying needs of new faculty were addressed, requiring flexibility and understanding. Changes implemented for Cohort 2:

- Moved from 2 days per week to one day per week
- Eliminated almost all faculty speakers
- How’s it going?
- Technology Minute
- Share a Strategy
- Heavy use of discussion of issues and readings
- Experience strategies as they were used in the sessions
- Feedback on all learning activities submitted in LMS
- Mentor Coaches

Data has been collected on the impact on their teaching and learning outcomes. Attitudes toward teaching indicate that learning to teach is strongly correlated with life-long learning/continuous improvement, community of learners, reflection on pedagogy, institutional support, strategy knowledge and supporting student engagement.

Discussion question: What challenges might you encounter at your institution?