Abstract

Two years ago, UMBC offered Teaching, Learning and Technology “mini-grants” to encourage faculty to develop innovative approaches to instruction and enhance tech fluency of students. Awards could be used individually or spread across a department, but recipients were required to present their approaches at an annual TLT Fair (www.umbc.edu/oit/tltfair).

Problem

Long-term, effective use of technology in teaching and learning takes a lot of time and effort to do well. But without official recognition and reward of this hard work, some faculty may decide not to bother. Others may grow content with tried and true approaches, but never reflect more deeply on their instructional goals and how best to achieve them. A faculty incentive grant program not only rewards pioneers, but also can provide a self-perpetuating supply of best practices that—with a little bit of promotion—can encourage and inspire faculty who’ve not used technology effectively or at all.

Solution

At UMBC, like a lot of schools, we’ve worked hard to create a ubiquitous computing environment where students and faculty have few obstacles to using technology in teaching and learning (www.umbc.edu/access). However, creating wide-spread, transforming change is difficult when there is no systematic reward for innovation or a critical mass of best practices to emulate.

In the spring of 2001, working with $20,000 from a state-funded, faculty support grant that was discontinued (www.umbc.edu/fact) we asked department chairs to submit one-page email proposals describing their approach to supporting university priorities of enhancing students’ technology skills and engagement with the university. A review committee consisting of faculty and staff, including the director of the new Faculty Development Center, awarded up to $5,000 for individual or departmental course redesign proposals, and required participants to present to colleagues how they used these “mini-grants” to achieve their stated goals.
Outcomes

Modeled after a teaching and technology “fair” at Duke University, our first TLT Fair in January of 2002 drew more than 40 faculty and included presentations by five of the original six mini-grant participants. A second round of grants totaling $25,000—funded jointly by the Office of Information Technology and Faculty Development Center—was awarded in the summer of 2002. In April of 2003, all six recipients participated in a panel at a joint UMBC and University of Maryland System TLT fair that was attended by more than 70 faculty state-wide (www.umbc.edu/oit/tltfair).

It is difficult to provide quantitative outcomes after only two years, but clearly the TLT “mini-grants” have sparked interest. In our first year, we only received five proposals and funded all of them to help get the program started. In our second year, we received twelve proposals but only funded six, mainly due to limited funds or marginal prospects for re-use by other faculty.

What the mini-grants did provide was a growing number of examples that can and have inspired future proposals. In fact, the English Department’s proposal for Blackboard training of all faculty in the first year, inspired the History Department’s similar proposal the following year. Both were extremely successful, largely because the “stipends” given to English faculty required their attendance, which in turn allowed for a critical mass of users who did and continue to support one another. History chose not to provide a stipend, but instead used the funds for a departmental lab that was necessary to support the increased number of faculty and students who were now using Blackboard.

In addition, the mini-grant recipients began to attend and present at our monthly TLT Brown Bag lectures (www.umbc.edu/brownbag), which helped us sustain quality programming before and after the larger TLT Fairs. Rather than a big-bang once a year, there is now an ongoing dialogue of committed faculty that has grown stronger since the Brown Bags were started in the late 90s.

Challenges & Changes

Unfortunately, severe state budget cuts this year have jeopardized the scope and maybe the future of the TLT Mini-grants. But the framework for a third-year is in place and many faculty have expressed interest in continuing the program.

As in previous years, the new mini-grants will change slightly in format, now requiring a two-year commitment from participants. The first year would support their individual course redesign projects. During the second year, participants would be required to mentor a colleague in their own and one other department, to explore how they can use technology and assist in the colleague’s submission of a proposal for future TLT mini-grant funding. While not required, these “mentors” would also be invited to serve on a review committee of future TLT applicants after they’ve completed their second year of support.
Relevance to other institutions

- Faculty learn best from other faculty. While instructional support staff can assist faculty who ask for or know their need of help, there is no substitute to supporting key faculty in a department who can inspire others to solve pedagogical problems or try new approaches. At the same time, you can’t exhaust these pioneers and must nurture their replacements.

- Faculty innovations with technology must be aligned to university teaching and learning priorities. Apart from making the best use of limited funds, the time and effort expended on marginally strategic approaches make it less likely for the University to support incentive programs when times are hard.

- The mini-grants help insure that the quality of TLT initiatives doesn’t diminish as the perceived quantity increases. For example, UMBC now supports more than 350 Blackboard courses every semester. While we’ve grown quickly from 50 courses in the spring of 2000, a recent user survey completed by 368 Blackboard students yielded more than 150 unsolicited comments about poor faculty usage of Blackboard. While we need to explore this issue further, we would be surprised to find such sentiments about courses in English and History—two departments who used their mini-grants for cohort-based, Blackboard training.

- Finally, it is important to include faculty in the review of proposals for technology incentive grants. In addition to representing the day-to-day issues faculty face to apply technology in the classroom, they know how to judge (and communicate) whether a colleague has been effective. And, they’re more likely to help support or even “own” the institutional agenda for teaching, learning and technology after the experience.