Faculty Engagement and Support

Good teachers are always rooting around for new ideas, more now than ever as the high-tech explosion makes use of learner-centered pedagogy much more feasible. More often than not, a new technique or strategy can be found at the other end of a keyword search, but increasingly, the classroom itself is drifting into cyberspace. Several presentations at the NLII’s annual meeting in San Diego focused on faculty members in transition, offering new models for the creation of blended classrooms and departments.

Overcoming the squabbling, competitive, and often polarized nature of faculty groups is both a necessity and a natural consequence of implementing a technology-centered program. Recognizing that fact of life in academic culture, Wake Forest University vice president and dean of the International Center for Computer-Enhanced Learning David G. Brown joined Sally Jackson, vice provost of educational technology at the University of Arizona to present their fascinating vision of a discipline-specific blending of technology and pedagogy—one that relies on disciplinary resources rather than taking the one-size-fits-all template approach.

Using a unique grid configuration that creates quadrants for interactivity, information, minimal media, and multimedia, Brown and Jackson demonstrated in their session titled Discipline-Specific Teaching Support how the tools and materials available can be retrofit to individual disciplines. Depending on the discipline, chat, tutorials, models, virtual worlds, text, sound, graphics, and animation can be used like building blocks in the creation of a blended classroom. Humanities departments, for example, might lean toward a text- and chat-heavy approach, while fine arts programs might opt for one that uses sound, graphics, and animation more effectively. In the design of new tech-supported learning environments, one size does not fit all, but a discipline-specific approach can help create models that are appropriate to departments and faculty groups with shared academic interests.

According to Jackson and Brown, the discipline-specific approach can revolutionize culture as well as pedagogy. They painted a clear portrait of department culture in a large university as balkanized workplaces in which teaching and research are pitted against each other in a struggle for resources and prestige and in which individuals operate in a vacuum of peer support, seeking assistance alone while forced into unhealthy competition. They promoted their model as the antidote: teaching and research agendas are joined under an umbrella of discipline-centered groups that are then led by the faculty and designed to promote unity and the sharing of resources.

But how can a school—especially a very large one—gain faculty ownership of new models for teaching and learning? Leaders from the Teaching and Learning Collaborative at the University of North Carolina discussed their successes in the unifying of professional development across the sprawling 16-campus state university system at their session titled The UNC Teaching and Learning with Technology Collaborative: 16 Campuses Working Together to Promote TLT. Program coordinator Hilarie Nickerson and executive director Frank Prochaska demonstrated the portal they created to help 9,000 UNC faculty members buy into the university’s ongoing marriage of technology and teaching. The user-friendly portal features more than a thousand entries designed to assist teachers: reviews of resources, examples of successful practices, articles, links to specialized online communities, and much more. The portal also directs faculty to the Multimedia Education Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) (www.merlot.org), which has collected a wide array of learning objects for instructors to use in the online environment.

Faculty buy-in was also the central theme of a session titled Implementing and Adapting Multitiered Faculty Development Initiatives. University of Tennessee technologists Jean Ann Derco and Julie Little presented their model, which incorporates wireless laptop technology and reusable learning modules and units into the classroom while creating a statewide faculty development portal to help teachers climb on board.

In Combining Faculty Engagement with Readiness Assessment: A Case in Point, University of Hartford senior adviser of technology planning and assessment and former NLII fellow Paul Hagner unveiled his school’s efforts to pair readiness assessment with faculty engagement by first identifying four types of faculty members: entrepreneurs, second wave, careerists, and reluctants. What is the institution doing to help second-wave faculty? It’s building smart classrooms—from 2 in 1999 to 26 today, and it’s offering workshops to help faculty become proficient in Web page creation and management, leverage the
benefits of alternative teaching strategies in the classroom, and become more comfortable with Blackboard. It’s also pulling out the stops by means of incentives and support.

And it seems to be working. Hagner reported that in October 2000, the institution’s investment in Blackboard yielded two users, courses, and instructors. By January 2002 those numbers had risen to an astonishing 4,543 users, 520 courses, and 289 instructors.

The whole issue of faculty engagement was an NLII key theme for 2000–2001, as indicated by Hagner’s fellowship research focus. For more information, see his white paper “Interesting Practices and Best Systems in Faculty Engagement and Support,” which appears on the NLII Key Documents page at www.educause.edu/nlii/keydocs/index.asp.