

Bridging the Gap with Faculty Learning Communities: Creating Community between Onsite and Offsite Faculty

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This paper explores the learning community at an online university comprised of both onsite and offsite, fulltime faculty members. In this mixed methods study, researchers investigated the impact of various professional development opportunities. Participants were surveyed and interviewed. Results indicate strong agreement that professional development has a strong impact on sense of community and efficacy and attitudes towards roles and responsibilities; while professional development appeared to have less of an impact on student learning, persistence, and retention. Findings have been used to help inform future professional development opportunities and the possible establishment of more structured faculty learning community.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education faculty have a variety of rich experiences, backgrounds, and qualifications that contribute to the overall success of both the students and the college they represent. At some institutions, the professional pool consists of full-time faculty located offsite, working remotely, and exclusively through an online environment as well as those assigned to localized, onsite locations. While both types of faculty contribute to the overall quality of the programs and colleges in which they practice, a feeling of disconnect may exist between the two groups of faculty resulting in a lack of community among members.

When fulltime, offsite faculty were first hired at the online university used in this study, learning and professional development opportunities were not expressly designed to support these faculty, many of whom came from traditional face-to-face institutions of higher education or K-12 public education settings where faculty learning communities are standard practice. Since then, the university and the College of Education (used specifically in this study) have offered various learning and professional development opportunities and have made efforts to create a community among faculty; however, the impact of these collective efforts has not been measured or thoroughly evaluated.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of learning and professional development opportunities on faculty engagement, efficacy, and sense of community. Specifically, the research questions for this study are:

- How have various learning and professional development opportunities impacted fulltime faculty's: (1) sense of community with all faculty members, (2) efficacy and attitudes toward

their roles and responsibilities, and (3) perceived impact on student learning, persistence, and retention?

- How can these findings help inform future learning and professional development opportunities and the possible establishment of Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the literature regarding learning communities involves Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in the PK-12 setting, emphasizing the need for a team approach to student learning and a focus on quality teaching. Thus, the primary goal of a PLC is to strengthen the quality of teaching through continuous professional learning, ultimately resulting in increased student achievement (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, Roussin, & Sommers, 2010). Research in the field of quality teaching and professional development of teachers also emphasizes the importance of one's efficacy. A teacher's belief in their personal efficacy to motivate students and promote learning directly impacts the learning environments they create and the academic progress of their students along with contributing to their schools' level of academic achievement (Bandura, 1993).

In his review of research on learning communities in higher education, Cox (2004) reveals that the isolation of faculty and curriculum in departments and disciplines is the barrier to creating community. With offsite faculty often experiencing feelings of disconnect from their onsite colleagues and leaders, creating opportunities for community building and membership are vital in promoting a sense of efficacy and supporting learning and development (Senge, 2000). Creating a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) program is one approach that engages community in the cause of student and faculty learning and of transforming our institutions of higher education into learning organizations (Cox, 2001). Cox (2004) outlines 10 specific qualities that are necessary for building community in FLCs. These qualities, included in the methodology section and Appendix B, informed the survey questions for this study.

Senge (2000) also reports that department chairs, as local leaders, must model the behavior necessary to build community. In learning communities, all members of the group are learners, and the group is organized to learn as a whole system (Baker, 1999). From Cox's research and implementation of FLCs across multiple institutions of higher education, there exists a strong need for community in higher education among faculty. As such, the potential outcomes of an FLC include increased faculty interest in teaching and learning, application of learning to one's teaching practice, increased faculty collaboration across disciplines, opportunities for reflection about coherence of learning across disciplines, and an awareness of the complexity of teaching and learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this study, a mixed methods approach was utilized that included both surveys and interviews. This approach elicited both qualitative and quantitative responses from faculty regarding their level of engagement as a member of the faculty community, their sense of self-efficacy related to performing their various roles and responsibilities (including teaching), and the impact that being part of a community has on their ability to provide high-quality instruction and support for their students. The population consisted of 25 fulltime, onsite and offsite faculty members in the College of Education of a large online university. The study made use of convenience sampling. This design was selected as it was the purpose of this research to study this specific group of faculty.

The first phase of the study consisted of an online survey using Qualtrics completed by 25 fulltime faculty members (see Appendix A for survey). The survey questions in this study were informed by Cox's 10 "Qualities Necessary for Community in FLCs" (2004, p. 18-19): (1) safety and trust, (2) openness, (3) respect, (4) responsiveness, (5) collaboration, (6) relevance, (7) challenge, (8) enjoyment, (9) esprit de corps, and (10) empowerment (see Appendix B for full description). The theme of responsiveness is the only quality from Cox's list that was not used in this study as the researchers found it to be too similar to

the theme of respect. Quantitative analysis using SPSS included descriptive statistics and frequency distributions.

The second phase of the study consisted of phone interviews of five survey respondents who volunteered to be interviewed (see Appendix C for interview questions). Qualitative analysis included the use of transcription of interview responses, segmenting data into meaningful units, coding patterns using in vivo codes, and identifying themes that emerged. Qualitative analysis was completed by only one of the researchers so measurement of intercoder reliability was not needed.

RESULTS

An analysis of both quantitative data (survey) and qualitative data (one open-ended survey question and interviews) was conducted. The following tables depict the survey results analysis by research question using descriptive statistics themed around nine of Cox's ten qualities for FLCs. For the purpose of sharing results, research question one has been separated into three subcategories. Research question one asks: How have various learning and professional development opportunities impacted fulltime faculty's: (1) sense of community with all faculty members, (2) efficacy and attitudes toward their roles and responsibilities, and (3) perceived impact on student learning, persistence, and retention?

Sense of Community

Overall, faculty perceive a strong sense of community in the COE. The majority of respondents (60-92%) agreed or strongly agreed with the community-related statements. With Cox's themes in mind, Respect was rated the highest (mean=4.10) followed by Esprit de Corps (mean=4.08) and Enjoyment (mean=4.04). Openness (mean=3.52) was rated the lowest.

TABLE 1
FACULTY'S SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Cox Theme	Mean
Safety and Trust	3.82
Openness	3.52
Respect	4.10
Collaboration	3.97
Enjoyment	4.04
Esprit de Corps	4.08
<i>Overall Faculty Sense of Community</i>	<i>3.92</i>

Roles and Responsibilities

Overall, faculty have moderately strong attitudes and sense of efficacy toward their roles and responsibilities as a result of participating in various professional development activities. The majority of respondents (68-84%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statements related to roles and responsibilities. With Cox's themes in mind, Relevance was rated the highest (mean=4.08) followed by Empowerment (mean=3.96). Challenge (mean=3.86) was rated the lowest.

TABLE 2
ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Cox Theme	Mean
Relevance	4.08
Challenge	3.86
Empowerment	3.96
<i>Overall Roles and Responsibilities</i>	<i>3.93</i>

Student Learning

The area of perceived impact on student learning, persistence, and retention was rated lowest of the three research areas with an overall mean of 3.64. In addition to follow-up interviews that elicited qualitative results, an open-ended question was included in the survey: “Please provide comments and/or observations regarding ... professional development opportunities you’ve experienced such as challenges, areas of needed improvement, what influenced your participation, and what has been of particular value.”

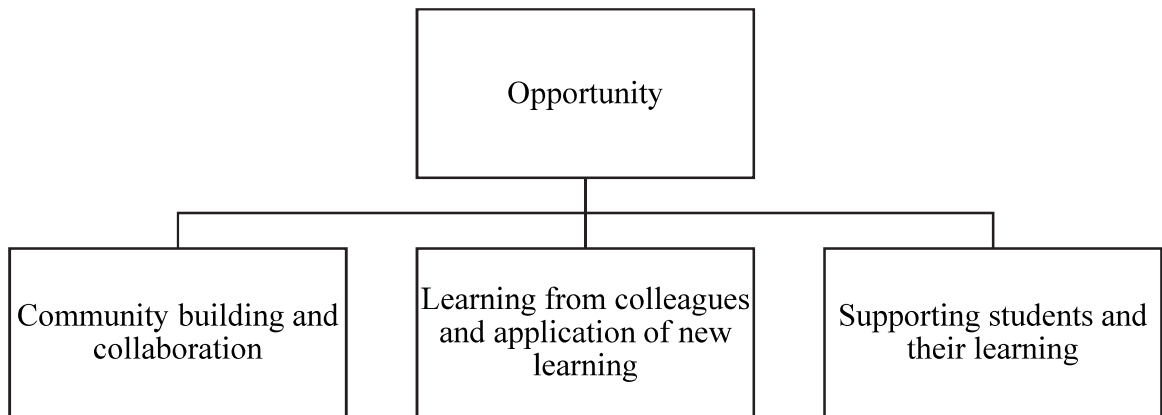
TABLE 3
IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING*

	Mean
Impact on Student Learning	3.72
Impact on Student Persistence	3.68
Impact on Student Retention	3.52
<i>Overall Impact on Learning</i>	<i>3.64</i>
*There are no Cox themes related to these questions	

Themes derived from the open-ended survey question are consistent with the quantitative survey data, showing a strong sense of community by the faculty, moderately positive attitudes and sense of efficacy toward their roles and responsibilities relative to professional development, and weaker sense of professional development impact on student learning, persistence, and retention. Resounding support of and a preferences for face-to-face professional development opportunities such as attending fall commencement were evident.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with the five participants who indicated interest on the survey. The following hierarchical classification depicts the major themes that emerged from the interviews. In each interview, faculty members used the word “opportunity” to describe the various professional development activities that they had taken part in sponsored by the College of Education. Their additional responses indicate that these opportunities resulted in community building and collaboration with their colleagues, learning from their colleagues and applying that new learning, and supporting students and their learning.

**FIGURE 1
INTERVIEW FINDINGS**



Community Building and Collaboration

The first theme that emerged, community building and collaboration, occurred with the greatest frequency. The following list shows examples of responses when faculty were asked how professional development activities have impacted their sense of community and feeling of belongingness in the college.

- “It’s been phenomenal quite frankly.”
- “I feel much more supported here than other places.”
- “It definitely helps me feel connected. We have the *opportunity* to engage with our colleagues ... I’ve been able to develop stronger relationships with colleagues because we are working together to create.”

Learning from Colleagues and Applying New Learning

The second most frequent theme was learning from colleagues and applying that new learning. The following list shows examples of responses when faculty were asked to describe, in general, their experience participating in college-sponsored professional development activities.

- “I appreciate how frequently it is provided ... as remote employees, having that *opportunity* to come together and hear voices of our coworkers has been a great learning experience. The content seems well-planned out and relevant to what we are doing. If it is something I already know, it is reinforced and applied.”
- “Really positive, an *opportunity* to sit and talk together, to build community, get insight, see what other people are up to, research they are doing, ways to support students.”

Supporting Students and Their Learning

The third most frequent theme was related to supporting students and their learning. The following list shows examples of responses when faculty were asked how have professional development activities impacted their work with students. These comments were related to a series of college-sponsored webinars, led by faculty, which focused on growth v. fixed mindsets.

- “[It has] really opened my eyes about the students we have. I had a fixed mindset. Now I can take a step back, not everyone has the same experiences. Our students are nontraditional. I’ve learned to be more empathetic to their needs and backgrounds and how best to support them.”
- “[It was] in response to something, addressing under-resourced students. [It] helped to fill a void we may not be aware we have.”

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

From both the open-ended survey question and the follow-up interviews, participants provided suggestions for improvement to professional development activities in the College of Education to ensure that:

- Topics are relevant to the faculty.
- The purpose, outcomes, and goals of each activity are shared.
- Faculty are actively engaged in the activity rather than passively listening.
- The community is not “superficial”.
- All faculty are able to attend fall commencement (the only opportunity for face-to-face interaction).

In addition to the suggestions from faculty, the researchers suggest that future learning and professional development opportunities show more of a clear connection to student learning, persistence, and retention as this was the lowest rated area on the survey.

CONCLUSION

The isolation that offsite faculty may experience can lead to feelings of disconnect from administrators, colleagues, and many times students. Thus, learning and professional development opportunities as well as faculty community building play an important role in the development and achievement of both faculty and students. This study sought to measure the effectiveness of various learning and professional development opportunities with College of Education faculty at an online university. Further, it aimed to inform future learning and professional development opportunities and possibly establish an official Faculty Learning Community (FLC). Using Cox's (2004) Qualities Necessary for Community is FLCs, the researchers found that an FLC already existed in the College of Education, though perhaps not by that name. The faculty in this college indicated an overall agreement that these qualities were already in place, although suggestions for improving the FLC were noted including an increased focus on relevance and participation from all faculty members.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

While not a focus of this research, some differences appeared between the responses of onsite and offsite faculty (i.e., onsite faculty generally rated higher). This is a potential area for additional research. Further, the findings from this study showcasing the FLC in the College of Education can be shared with other departments and colleges at the university that are also comprised of onsite and offsite faculty. Lastly, given the small sample size, this study could be replicated (perhaps across the entire university) using a larger group of participants.

This study has the potential to have a significant impact on the field of research related to FLCs since much of this research has focused on traditional, face-to-face institutions of higher education rather than those that are uniquely online. With the dramatic growth of online learning, colleges and universities will need to intentionally design effective faculty learning communities for their offsite faculty. The researchers are hopeful that this study can showcase the best practices for a successful FLC.

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APPENDIX A SURVEY QUESTIONS

The purpose of this survey is to rate your level of agreement with statements related to learning and professional development opportunities and sense of community as a FT faculty member of the COE.

- 1=Strongly Disagree
- 2=Disagree
- 3=No Opinion
- 4=Agree
- 5=Strongly Agree

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements as they pertain to your sense of community with colleagues:

1. I feel confident discussing my personal strengths and accomplishments with my COE colleagues. (*safety and trust*)¹
2. I am comfortable discussing my perceived inadequacies with most of my COE colleagues. (*safety and trust*)
3. I can trust other COE colleagues who I come in contact with less frequently and who are not my immediate colleagues. (*safety and trust*)
4. I am able to be openly, honestly, and comfortably share my beliefs with my COE colleagues without fear of retribution. (*openness*)
5. I feel respected by my COE colleagues. (*respect*)
6. I feel my opinions, suggestions, and contributions are valued. (*respect*)
7. Members of the COE willingly and effectively collaborate. (*collaboration*)
8. My participation in COE professional development opportunities makes me feel supported and encouraged by my colleagues and COE leadership. (*collaboration*)
9. My level of interaction with most COE colleagues is very high. (*collaboration*)
10. I feel connected with my COE colleagues because of professional development opportunities. (*enjoyment*)
11. There is a feeling of esprit de corps (pride, fellowship, and common loyalty) in the COE. (*esprit de corps*)

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements as they pertain to your roles and responsibilities:

1. The subject matter and learning outcomes of COE professional development support and relate to my assigned roles and responsibilities, professional interests, and experiences. (*relevance*)
2. I have applied what I've learned in COE professional development opportunities to my teaching practice. (*relevance*)
3. I have applied what I've learned in COE professional development opportunities to my full-time faculty role and responsibilities. (*relevance*)
4. COE professional development allows me to share theoretical perspectives on teaching and learning. (*challenge*)
5. Expectations for the quality of COE professional development are reasonably high and provide reasonable challenges. (*challenge*)
6. Expectations for COE professional development engender a sense of progress, scholarship, value, and accomplishment. (*challenge*)
7. COE professional development allows me to share specific topical information related to my area of expertise and/or technology tools that affect learning outcomes. (*challenge*)

8. COE professional development allows me to share perspectives on my role as a faculty member and building a community of colleagues. (*challenge*)
9. COE professional development allows me to share my perspectives on effective skills as an instructor. (*challenge*)
10. I am encouraged to seek out and share teaching and other real-life examples to illustrate COE professional development learning outcomes. (*challenge*)
11. COE professional development opportunities have made me more confident and effective as an instructor and a fulltime faculty member. (*empowerment*)

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements as they pertain to student learning, persistence, and retention²:

1. COE professional development opportunities have had an impact on my students' learning.
2. COE professional development opportunities have had an impact on my students' persistence (i.e., continuing towards their educational goals).
3. COE professional development opportunities have had an impact on my students' retention in their courses and programs of study.

Open-Ended Question

1. Please provide comments and/or observations regarding the COE professional development opportunities you've experienced such as challenges, areas of needed improvement, what influenced your participation, and what has been of particular value.

Interview Interest

1. Would you be willing to participate in a brief follow-up interview?

APPENDIX B

COX'S (2004) QUALITIES NECESSARY FOR COMMUNITY IN FLCs

Safety and Trust. In order for participants to connect with each other, there must be a sense of safety and trust. This is especially true as participants reveal weaknesses in their teaching or ignorance of teaching processes or literature.

Openness. In an atmosphere of openness, participants can feel free to share their thoughts and feelings without fear of retribution. For example, in the Community Using Difference to Enhance Teaching and Learning at Miami, participants were able to discuss ways that other participants or colleagues offend them.

Respect. In order to coalesce as a learning community, members need to feel that they are valued and respected as people. It is important for the university to acknowledge their participation and financially support community projects and attendance at related conferences.

Responsiveness. Members must respond respectfully to each other, and the facilitator(s) must respond quickly to their participants. The facilitation should welcome concerns and preferences, and when appropriate, share these with individuals and the community.³

Collaboration. The importance of collaboration in consultation and group discussion on individual members' projects and on achieving learning outcomes hinges on the group's ability to work with and respond to each other. In addition to individual projects, joint projects and presentations should be welcomed.

Relevance. Learning outcomes are enhanced by relating the subject matter to the participants' teaching, courses, scholarship, and life experiences. All participants should be encouraged to seek out and share teaching and other real-life examples to illustrate them.

Challenge. Expectations for the quality of outcomes should be high, engendering a sense of progress, scholarship, and accomplishment. Sessions should include, for example, those in which individuals share syllabi and report on their individual projects.

Enjoyment. Activities must include social opportunities to lighten up, bond, and should take place in invigorating environments. For example, a retreat can take place off campus at a nearby country inn, state park, historic site, or the like.

Esprit de Corps. Sharing individual and community outcomes with colleagues in the academy should generate pride and loyalty. For example, when the community makes a campus-wide presentation, participants strive to provide an excellent session.

Empowerment. A sense of empowerment is both a crucial element and a desired outcome of participation in a faculty learning community. In the construction of a transformative learning environment, the participants gain a new view of themselves and a new sense of confidence in their abilities. Faculty leave their year of participation with better courses and clearer understanding of themselves and their students. Key outcomes include scholarly teaching and contributions to the scholarship of teaching.

Source: Introduction to Faculty Learning Communities (Cox, 2004)

APPENDIX C INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

This interview as an informal conversation that allows you to respond more deeply to the topics of our survey that you took a few months ago. Feel free to share as much as you'd like about any of the areas focused on. We hope that by gaining more in depth information from you and others, we can gain a greater understanding of and appreciation for what is most beneficial to us as fulltime faculty with regard to professional growth. In turn, this information may be communicated in to those in decision making roles so as to impact the planning that goes into our professional development opportunities.

Interview Questions

1. Describe your experiences participating in College of Education (COE) professional development activities.
2. How have the professional development activities impacted your sense of community (feeling of belongingness) in the COE?
3. How have the professional development activities impacted your roles and responsibilities as a faculty member in the COE?
4. How have the professional development activities impacted your work with students (e.g., student learning, persistence, retention)?
5. Which types of activities have been the most useful to your role as a COE faculty member?
6. Which types of activities have not been as useful?
7. How would you improve COE professional development?
8. Anything we didn't ask that you'd like to add or ask?

ENDNOTES

1. Alignment to Cox theme; themes were not included in participants' survey
2. There were no Cox themes aligned to this set of questions
3. The theme of responsiveness was not included in the survey questions.