
Summary

This article examines a program begun at Iowa State University through funding provided by a USDA Higher Education Challenge Grant. Recognizing the increasing demand by employers for college graduates capable of “thinking on their feet” and growing evidence that traditional courses were failing to effectively transfer knowledge to students, the aforementioned program (LEA/RN-Learning Enhancement Action/Resource Network) was designed to facilitate the shift to a learning-centered educational model. The program had several constituent parts: a four day introductory workshop; a four day advanced workshop; and a series of bi-weekly, two hour sessions over the course of an academic year. All components of the program were led by facilitators with strong backgrounds in learning-centered pedagogical theory and practice, and were conducted in modelling style. That is to say, the workshops and bi-weekly sessions were structured as learning-centered educational environments, in which the attendees (faculty, administrative staff, staff) would participate in the implementation of the very same sort of approaches that they would later implement on their own.

Each aspect of the overarching program, in addition to modelling learning-centered methods, was also grounded in learning theory and had a particular curricular focus. The introductory workshop focused on comparing teacher-centered and cooperative learning-centered course structures, identifying the necessary elements for effective team teaching systems, and confronting participants’ concerns about shifting away from a traditional course approach. The advanced workshop delved into more complex strategies for learning-centered pedagogy, and made a fuller examination of the extent literature/research on the subject. Finally, the bi-weekly sessions offered an on-going laboratory for the development of learning-centered education. Each session was constructed by facilitators as if it were a lesson for students, complete with participant learning outcomes, assigned readings/homework, in-session practice, and opportunities to discuss what had/hadn’t worked in the classroom.

Conclusions

The study of the LEA/RN program at Iowa State University drew several key conclusions. Unsurprisingly, the study noted that the participants who attended all elements of the training (introductory workshop, advanced workshop, and bi-weekly sessions) had the greatest success in both transitioning from teaching-centered to learning-centered classrooms and in experience positive results with students in their classrooms. Similarly, it found that workshops alone were unlikely to produce meaningful change. Additionally, the study concluded that in order to maximize success, the program had to have experienced facilitators who had a firm grounding in the literature, adept at translating this material into readily accessible form that eased practical application in the classroom, capable of conducting all facets of the program through learning-centered modelling. Finally, the study found that without full support from the administration it would be difficult to achieve systemic change.
Application

It would appear that the study examined in this article is highly relevant to the efforts under way at UDC. In essence, Iowa State’s LEA/RN program potentially provides a readily adoptable model for the advanced center for teaching and learning, or academy, proposed by Vision 2022. It also suggests that in order to maximize any desired change in terms of creating an advanced system of teaching and learning, UDC will need to look beyond one off professional development workshops. While such programs are certainly worthwhile as a means of reaching a much broader segment of the University community at any single moment, a more rigorous and thorough program of professional development will be necessary in order to implement deeper change. This of course jibes well with the notion of an academy drawing participants from all segments of the University system for year-long apprenticeships. Unfortunately, while the article offers a broad brush illustration of how such an academy might be effectively structured, it does not go into any level of specifics as to the subject matter, literature/research applied, and topics covered in its numerous sessions. Though this material could be relatively easily developed and delivered by those tasked with shaping the center for advanced teaching and learning, it would seem useful to see if Iowa State’s program has more detailed curricula available for public perusal.

Citations of Interest


Sparks, G.M. “Synthesis of Research on Staff Development for Effective Teaching,” Educational Leadership, v. 43, n. 3 (1983)