

Supporting New Scholars: A Learner-Centered Approach to New Faculty Orientation

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A new generation of faculty is entering the academic workforce and they are increasingly dissatisfied with current working environments. Institutions must begin to address the changing nature of this new generation. This article reports on a New Faculty Orientation program based on elements of the learner-centered pedagogy. The goal was to achieve an atmosphere of trust and safety in a community of scholars, to encourage collaboration and experimentation.

Keywords: Learner-centered; new scholars; faculty orientation

Introduction: The New Generation of Scholars

The United States is witnessing an emerging public outcry for accountability in higher education. Institutions have responded to the calls for change by attempting to revitalize undergraduate education by shifting to a learner-centered focus. To this point, most of the focus has been on changes in classroom pedagogy. However, this shift must extend beyond the walls of the classroom to the entire organization if it is to be a true paradigm shift. As Barr wrote, "Without a vision and design for the whole of the system, incremental changes do not add up to anything significant." (1998, p. 23.) Just as the characteristics of the new generation of undergraduate students, the Millennials, has led educators to reconsider classroom practices, the characteristics of the new generation of academics entering the workforce requires reconsideration of institutional policies and procedures. Unlike their predecessors, the new generation of faculty entering the workforce has expressed their increasing dissatisfaction with the traditional academic work environment. Among the factors that they have identified as contributing to this dissatisfaction are the lack of coherent tenure policies, a lack of collegiality, and lack of an integrated life. This article reports on the results of an orientation program for new faculty designed to respond to these factors. The program, designed according to learner-centered principles, sought to establish a community of scholars that encouraged collaboration and innovation.

Background

While there have been a number of contributions over the past decade to an evolving view of a new professoriate, (Beaudoin, 1998; Anderson, 2002; Baldwin & Chronister, 2002; Boice, 1992; Finklestein & Schuster, 2001; Moody, 1997) most of the work has focused on the impact of technology on the role of the professoriate and the changing demographics with the increased institutional reliance on part time positions.

Examinations of overall job satisfaction in academe regardless of gender or color have focused on job-related stress (Blackburn & Bentley, 1993; Amey, 1996; Smart, 1990) and collegiality and morale (Copur, 1990; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002). Hagedorn (2000) and Oshagbemi (1997) offer conceptualizations of job satisfaction. These examinations and others dating back thirty years (Near et al, 1978; Nicholson & Miljus, 1972; Hunt & Saul, 1975; Devries, 1975; Driscoll, 1978) do not address the new generation of scholars now entering the academic workforce.

A recent study of tenure-track faculty shed light on the generational characteristics of this new cohort of scholars. *The Study of New Scholars* (2002) by the Harvard Graduate School of Education explored the rising dissatisfaction among new tenure-track faculty. Junior faculty across the U.S. were surveyed in order to assess their attitudes and sense of job satisfaction, examining such factors as tenure, workload, support for professional development, climate/collegiality, and policies on such things as performance, research, service, etc. The three main concerns identified through the survey were 1) the lack of a comprehensible tenure system, 2) lack of community, and 3) lack of an integrated life. Interestingly, these same three concerns were voiced by new faculty in a survey conducted by American Association of Higher Education (Rice, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000) and nearly a decade earlier (Boice, 1992; Sorcinelli, 1992). Those surveyed expected to join a collegial, supportive work environment that provided opportunity for a balanced life. They were looking for “communities where collaboration is respected and encouraged, where friendships develop between colleagues within and across departments.” (Rice, Sorcelinelli, & Austin, 2000, p. 13) They approached academe with an idealistic, some might claim naïve, conception of the university as a haven for creativity and intellectual camaraderie. Drawn to academic careers because their love of learning and the perceived ability to pursue creative and intellectual interests, they looked forward to being part of a community of scholars. What they discovered was a politicized and, in many respects, antiquated system to which they had to make considerable sacrifice in order to be acculturated.

These findings provide a starting point that can be used to inform institutions as they address the challenges of attracting and keeping new faculty amid an increasing awareness that this new generation of scholars is growing more and more dissatisfied and disillusioned with academic careers.

Competing Paradigms

The perceived incongruity between the expectations and the reality of the academic workplace can be illuminated by an examination of the difference between what Senge (1998) defined as controlling organizations and learning organizations. Interestingly, the differences between the controlling and learning organizations are also remarkably similar to the differences between the traditional instructional paradigm and the learner-centered paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

Institutions of higher education seldom reflect the characteristics of the learning organizations. Instead, they tend to reflect the characteristics of controlling organizations, organizations that are traditionally authoritarian (Flynn, 2006). Controlling organizations in Senge's view are often dominated by internal politics and game playing. Learning organizations, conversely, are characterized by an atmosphere of openness, honesty, and collaboration.

Let us consider the work environment of the controlling organization and the many ways it reflects the traditional instructional paradigm from which institutions are trying to shift. In the traditional instructional paradigm, the teacher holds power and control over the student who must meet the expectations of the teacher whether or not those expectations were clearly delineated or articulated. Students are discouraged from collaborating in this competitive environment. They are judged on their individual abilities in competition with the others in the class. The teacher is not a facilitator or mentor but, rather, a judge and, often, a gatekeeper.

The role of the junior faculty member in this authoritarian paradigm is strikingly similar to that of the student in the traditional instructional paradigm. The junior faculty member finds him or herself rendered powerless by the tenure process which in some cases can be secretive in nature with no clear or articulated expectations (Harvard Study of New Scholars, 2002). The competitive nature of the process involved in gaining tenure often creates ambiguous relationships among junior faculty members and between junior faculty members and their tenured counterparts (Amey, 1996). The process exacerbates the tendency of academe to promote isolation rather than cooperation (Menges & Exum, 1983). It pits colleagues against each other in the many times ruthless competition for select tenured slots. The rigor of the process does not take into account cultural differences including such factors as the impact of racial and ethnic background on success (Banks, 1984; Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; De la Luz Reyes and Halcon, 1988; Menges and Exum, 1983) and the lack of collegiality experienced by people of color result in a sense of isolation (Chused, 1988; Turner & Myers, 2000) Nor does the system take into account gender differences. Currie et al (2002) examined those barriers, both structural in regard to policies and practices and cultural, in regard to traditional features of academic culture all of which have lead women to remain at lower ranks with lower pay. Acker (1990), Chliwiniak (1997) and Currie, Thiele, & Harris (2002) also found that women predominate in certain disciplines and lower ranks within the system. Other researchers have examined the impact of women's biological clocks in relation to the probationary period and the resulting impact that has had on advancement of women in academe (Collay, 2002; Cooper and Stevens, 2002; Menges and Exum, 1983). In this authoritarian tradition there is one way of knowing,

one way of conducting research, one way to assimilate into a department or unit, one way to demonstrate success and one way to achieve tenure and rank. (The Study of New Scholars) Within this framework, academic administrators often provide “vague, ambiguous, changing, or unrealistic” (Sabin, 2007, p. 2) expectations for new faculty while the tenured faculty provides conflicting messages regarding achievement of tenure and campus politics. It is no wonder that junior faculty is disillusioned by this work environment.

To develop a learning organization, leadership must make the paradigm shift to learner-centered complete and recognize that the shift will impact processes outside the classroom. The learner-centered class is in many ways a microcosm of the learner-centered university (Harris & Cullen, 2007). In other words, a learner-centered institution should reflect on a large scale the qualities that we expect to find in a learner-centered classroom. In considering the role of leadership in creating a work environment that is attractive and supportive of the new scholars, leadership must adopt the role akin to the teacher in the learner-centered paradigm. As current leadership theory purports (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Senge, 1990) leaders must be teachers. A workplace that is collegial, that fosters collaboration and takes into consideration the diverse backgrounds of the new scholars reflects the best practices regarding how people learn. The process of socializing new faculty to their role in an institution requires an understanding of that process and the factors that affect or inhibit learning.

Methods: Orienting the New Scholars

In an attempt to respond to the concerns of new scholars as described in the Harvard study, we designed a program for newly hired faculty. While the overarching goal of the new orientation for new faculty was to facilitate their transition into their new academic positions by creating a workplace more consistent with a learning organization, we chose to focus our assessment on a single outcome, creation of community. The Harvard study identified three major concerns of new hires, lack of clarity in tenure and promotion processes, lack of integrated life, and lack of community that respects collaboration and innovation. While clarification of the tenure and promotion process was a concern voiced by new faculty, the tenure and promotion processes are largely governed by faculty, so the possible impact of programming on clarifying that process was minimal. The lack of integrated life is tied to the pressures of meeting demands of tenure. Institutional policies greatly impact the possibility of an integrated life and revision of policies, particularly those related to personnel were outside of our immediate sphere of influence. For these reasons, we focused on establishing a sense of community that fostered innovation and collaboration grounded in best practices of learning theory.

We know from learning theory that learning is closely tied to emotion, and fear can be an inhibitor to learning (Zull, 2007). A sense of safety creates an environment where individuals feel free to experiment, to take risks, to challenge themselves. (Senge, 1990). Feeling safe to make mistakes is essential to fostering learning. It is part what Dwek (2006) calls the growth mindset. People with a growth mindset thrive on challenge and see error or failure as a means of progress, or growth. Kouzes and Posner (2002, p.214) reported that

repeatedly the people in their study told them how important mistakes and failure had been to their success. Without those experiences, they would have been unable to achieve their aspirations.

Collaboration is also key to establishing community. Leadership theory and learning theory both advocate collaboration. Kouzes and Posner (2002, p.242) claim that collaboration is *the* critical competency for achieving and sustaining high performance. Learning is social, and people learn through their interactions with each other and from each other. Vygotsky's theory of social development put forth the framework for the value of collaborative learning, indicating that individuals could learn more through collaboration than independent problem-solving. Social constructivists (Piaget, 1950; Bruner, 1961) furthered that concept by stressing that collaboration among learners is more productive than independent learning, in part, because of the opportunity for learners to share different backgrounds and skills.

We also sought to share power and control. Empowering individuals is key to good leadership and to establishing effective learning environments, as empowerment is tied to motivation. Perry (1997) found that students' perceived loss of control adversely affected their academic performance, concluding that a sense of control was tied to motivation. Zull (2002) also examined control in relation to brain function and noted that extrinsic motivation is akin to loss of control. Intrinsic motivation for learning creates a sense of control over one's learning. In discussing this relationship between empowerment and motivation Kouzes and Posner (2002) note, "It's evident from our research, and from studies by many others, that if people are going to do their best, they must be internally motivated. And this is nowhere more true than in higher education." (p. 53)

Cox and Richlin (2004) note that faculty learning communities have proven to be an effective means for tackling institutional challenges, and since ultimate challenge we were addressing was one of institutional culture, we chose the learning community as the basis for design for a new faculty orientation program, recognizing that the orientation of new faculty is a single facet in a multi-faceted challenge of changing institutional culture from an instructional/controlling organization to a learner-centered / learning organization.

Learning communities are becoming widely accepted as a means of improving student retention and engagement. The concept of student learning communities dates back to the 1930's (Dewey, 1933; Meiklejohn, 1933) when the idea of cohorts of students taking similar courses was initiated. The movement finally became solidified through the work at Evergreen State University in the 1980s (Jones, 1981). Similarly, faculty learning communities have become a standard feature of professional development offerings. Cox (2004) defines a faculty learning community as a group of six to fifteen cross-disciplinary faculty "who engage in active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning development, the scholarship of teaching and community building." (p. 8) Cox identifies ten qualities that must be present in a faculty learning community to foster community. They include:

1. Safety and trust. They must feel safe to reveal weaknesses or ignorance of teaching processes or literature.

2. Openness. Participants must feel safe to share thoughts and feelings without fear of retribution.
3. Respect. The university must acknowledge their participation through financial support.
4. Responsiveness. Participants must respond respectfully to one another.
5. Collaboration. Group must have the ability to respond to one another. Joint projects and presentations should also be welcomed.
6. Relevance. Learning outcomes are enhanced by relating subject matter to participants' teaching, courses, scholarship.
7. Challenge. Expectations should be held high.
8. Enjoyment. Social opportunities should be included.
9. Esprit de Corps. Sharing individual and group outcomes should generate sense of pride.
10. Empowerment. Empowerment is a desired learning outcome. Participants should gain new insight to themselves and new sense of confidence in their abilities.
(Cox, 2000, p. 19)

Our program was designed according to these principles. The new faculty met for a week-long program prior to the beginning of classes, prior to the return of the other faculty. The objective of meeting at this time was to create an opportunity for the new faculty to bond with one another prior to being introduced to their own department or unit colleagues. Historically, there had been no organized orientation for new faculty. If any faculty orientation had been conducted at all, it had been done within departments. College tenure policies recommended to new faculty to begin service work within their department, then their college, and finally at the University level. This often resulted in new faculty going several years without meeting colleagues outside of their own department or college. In spite of the small town, rural geographic location of the university with approximately 450 tenured positions, it was not unusual to find individuals who had worked at the university and lived locally for fifteen to twenty years yet they had not met one another. This phenomenon was a clear indication of the need for cross-disciplinary development.

The Faculty Center conducted the programming. We wanted to establish a rapport between staff at the Center and the new faculty in order for them to establish a safe place, as it were, for the new faculty to go to throughout their transition to the institution. The Center provides a variety of services to support faculty teaching and scholarship outside of the context of departmental review or administrative oversight. The interactions between faculty and Center staff are confidential and always formative in nature. We saw the development of this relationship as key to the success of creating a sense of safety and trust, since we knew that we had a considerable distance to go in developing that relationship of trust within individual departments.

Though programming was conducted by Center staff, the deans and department heads also played a role akin to learner-centered teacher, establishing themselves as mentors and facilitators of the new faculty's future success. First, the deans and department heads attended the planned programming to emphasize the concept that everyone is a learner in a learner-centered organization. Further, we encouraged the deans and department heads to

spend time learning about the new members of their colleges. At the college and department level, we resisted providing pre-packaged orientation materials, a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, we asked the deans and department heads to sit down with each new faculty member, get to know him or her, and talk individually about the individual's expectations of the new position. Likewise, this was an opportunity to give clear goals in terms of the institution's expectations of the new faculty member. By individualizing the discussion of goals and expectations, we sought to establish a sense of shared power. Goals were not mandated, but instead discussed and even negotiated. By shifting responsibility to the deans and department heads, we also sought to decentralize the authority and responsibility for the program by shifting power to the colleges.

The leadership of the division also met with the new faculty and took part in the sessions. Most important, the vice president for academic affairs made the point to the new scholars in the presence of their deans and department heads that as an organization, we encourage experimentation and we recognize that some experiments fail, emphasizing the literature on failure as a stepping stone to success and a key to establishing a growth mindset. The vice president also emphasized that as an organization, we recognize that students are often resistant to the learner-centered pedagogical techniques and that the implementation of those strategies could very likely lead to unfavorable student evaluations and that the department heads and deans would recognize this and be supportive of their continued efforts to implement new strategies with ongoing assessment and reflection.

We also incorporated a number of social activities in order to foster a sense of community. We believed that it was important to hold activities for entire families in order to foster a sense of belonging, and also to send the message that we do understand the balance needed between work and family and that as an institution, we value family and respect the need for a balanced life. These events included tenured faculty and administrators as well as selected individuals from the local community. The social activities were held off campus in casual settings to promote both a sense of ease and friendship among the group and to flatten or balance the perceived hierarchy or power relationships between tenured faculty, administration, and the new faculty.

After the first week of intense programming the community met weekly with staff from the faculty center for the remainder of the academic year. They studied together, planned their courses together, and discussed scholarship and opportunities for service. The community met weekly for the entire first year discussing topics related to teaching, scholarship and engagement. In order to foster the spirit of collaboration and interdisciplinary work, we provided support for professional development activities for the group. We made a commitment to them that based on the success of their collaboration, that this funding would be ongoing for them as a group/team indefinitely.

Demographics

The new faculty group consisted of thirty three individuals from seven colleges and the library; five in the College of Allied Health Sciences; nine in the College of Arts and Sciences; two in the College of Business; five in the College of Education and Human Services; one in the College of Optometry; three in the College of Pharmacy; seven in the

College of Technology, and one librarian. The group was predominantly male, thirteen females and twenty males and predominantly young with nineteen in the age range of twenty-five to thirty-five; ten in the age range of thirty-five to forty-five; and the remaining four over the age of forty-five. There was not much ethnic diversity, with thirty one Caucasians and only two internationals, one from India and one from Japan.

Their teaching experiences varied greatly. The six members of the College of Arts and Sciences and two of the three hires in the College of Education and Human Services had previous teaching experience. Three of the members of the College of Allied Health had no teaching experience and the other two had taught as adjuncts in the department for two years prior to being hired on tenure track; one from College of Business had no teaching while the other had considerable experience; two from the College of Education and Human Services, and the three from the College of Technology had extensive work experience but no teaching. The two members of the professional colleges, Optometry and Pharmacy, had no formal teaching experience but had clinical experience that was consistent with their new positions.

The departmental requirements for the positions also varied. Completed doctorates were required of the College of Arts and Sciences, College of Education and Human Services, Pharmacy and Optometry. The College of Allied Health Sciences and the College of Technology required a masters minimum, and the College of Business preferred a doctorate but accepted candidates with masters degrees in this instance.

Findings

In order to determine the effectiveness of the program in achieving community among the new hires, we surveyed the new faculty at the close of the week-long program in order to gain feedback about individual programs and workshops offered during the weeklong session and to ask for suggestions for next year's programming. In order to gain insight to our goal of creating community, we interviewed them two years later to find if they continued to collaborate with colleagues from their learning community. Our findings relate specifically to the individual interviews conducted with new faculty in their third year of employment.

In these interviews two specific questions were asked of each participant along with open ended questions to elicit general feedback. First, do you collaborate with the members of your learning community within your college?; and second, you collaborate with the members of your learning community outside your college? The responses to these two questions were positive in regard to the creation of community:

Of the original thirty-three hires, only fifteen took part in the year-long program either because they taught at a remote regional site, they had taught for an extended period on a temporary contract and were now being moved to tenure-line so had already been oriented to the community, or there were other scheduling conflicts that prevented their participation. Of those fifteen three left the university after the first year, leaving twelve to be interviewed. Of those twelve the majority reported keeping continual contact with the members of their community, noting that they were more likely to keep contact with those colleagues within their own college than outside their college.

Table 1. Perceptions of New Faculty Maintaining Collaborative Relationships Via Learning Communities Into Their Third Year of Employment

	Yes	No
Continue to collaborate with members of the learning community from within my college	84%	16%
Continue to collaborate with members of the learning community outside my college	66%	34%

Some of the comments made in discussion validated our worst fears about the advice offered by tenured colleagues and the power/control relationships of senior faculty and tenure review committees, especially in a unionized environment. However, the new faculty appreciated having colleagues outside of their units and departments to commiserate with regarding these issues.

Conclusion

In the spirit of transferring responsibility for learning to the learners, we asked the new faculty learning community to take a major role in planning the orientation for the next year's learning community. They did so with tremendous enthusiasm. They recommended retaining most of the programming but added a lunch and panel discussion between them and the newly hired faculty in order that they might share some of their first year experiences and offer advice. They also lengthened the session about the community and recommended that individuals from the Chamber of Commerce and volunteer agencies attend. And also in keeping with the new scholars' desire for balance between work and family, they incorporated more free time in the afternoons so that errands could be run and family matters attended to.

Our main goal was to establish a sense of community among the group and that goal was accomplished. The interviews indicated that the majority of the group maintained contact with other group members outside of their own discipline. A majority of comments pointed to the fact that they appreciated having contact with faculty outside of their discipline, particularly in regard to discussing concerns about tenure and political issues within their departments.

We also believe that we were successful in establishing a good rapport between the new hires and the Faculty Center. Every member of the group took advantage of a minimum of one Center activity during the year and most attended more than one. They commented in the interviews that they found the Center staff to be knowledgeable and looked to them for advice and support. They continue to take advantage of the Center services.

We acknowledge that this is one small attempt at changing a campus culture. Our new faculty orientation is a work in progress but we believe that taking a learner-centered approach has begun to make a difference in the campus culture, moving us one step closer to being a learning organization and a learner-centered campus.

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Issue 1

Assessment is for Learning: Formative Assessment and Positive Learning Interactions

1 - 16

Ian Clark

Supporting New Scholars: A Learner-Centered Approach to New Faculty Orientation

17 - 28

Roxanne Cullen, Michael Harris

Support and Resources for Site-Based Decision-Making Councils: Perceptions of Former Council Members of Two Large Kentucky School Districts

29 - 49

William R. Schlinker, William E. Kelley, Mary Hall O'Phelan, Sharon Spall

Site-Based Decision-Making: Views from Secondary School Personnel

50 - 61

Cindi Noel, John R. Slate, Michelle Stallone Brown, Carmen Tejeda-Delgado

Book Reviews

Minority Student Retention: The Best of the Journal of College Student Retention by Seidman, A.

62 - 66

Hannah H. Covert

Women Deans: Patterns of Power by Isaac, K.

67 - 72

Sun-Young Kim

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