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## Virtual Faculty Learning Communities: Making an Impact from a Distance

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**How familiar are you with FLCs?**

- A** – I'm an FLC expert
- B** – I have some experience with FLCs
- C** – I've heard of FLCs
- D** – FLCs???

Welcome! As you get settled, please participate in this brief poll. How familiar are you with FLCs? To vote, either visit [PollEV.com/atwell123](http://PollEV.com/atwell123) on your computer or mobile browser, or text ATWELL123 to the phone number 22333 to access the poll, and then vote using the letters next to each option.



# VIRTUAL FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITIES: MAKING AN IMPACT FROM A DISTANCE

ANGELA ATWELL, FACULTY DEVELOPMENT INSTRUCTOR

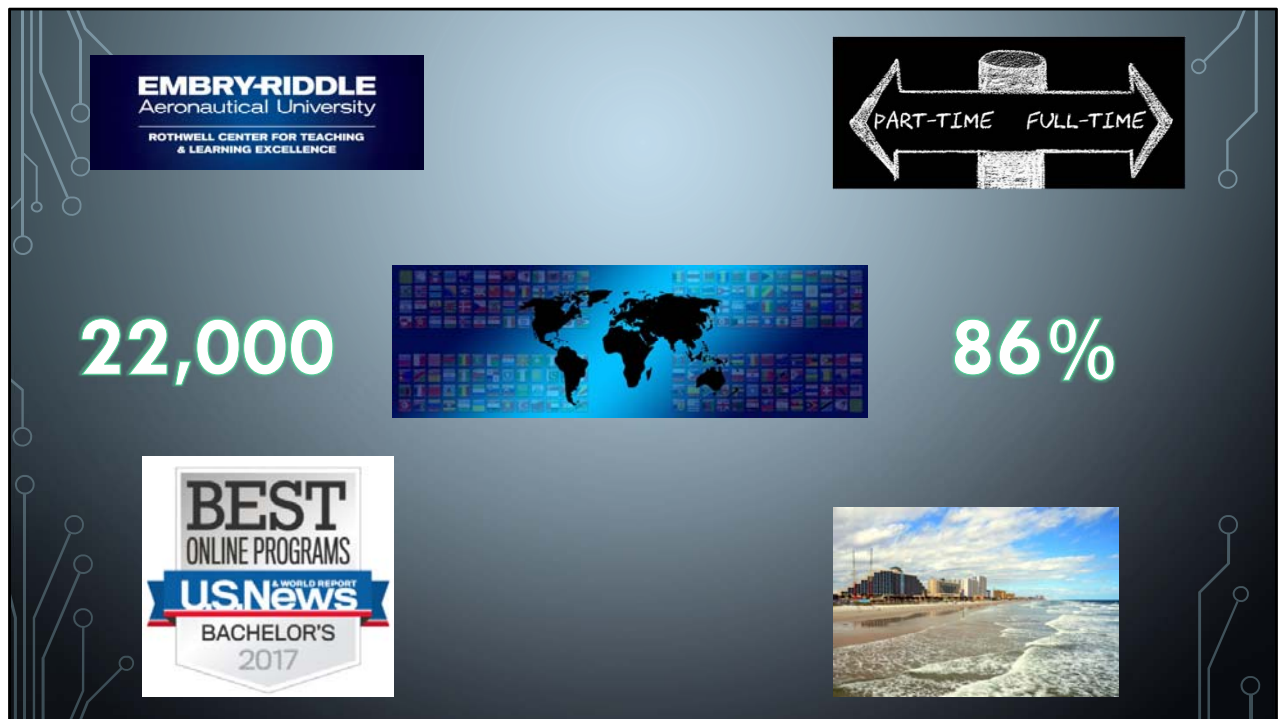
CRISTINA COTTOM, RESEARCH SPECIALIST

SARA OMBRES, DIRECTOR

**Sara:**

Hello everyone and welcome to the presentation. My name is Sara Ombres, I am the Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's Worldwide Campus. Our presentation is about virtual faculty learning communities, and how you can make an impact on your faculty from a distance. Since we are doing a presentation on virtual communities, it's only appropriate that we have virtual presenters as well! So, also presenting with me are two of the other members of our Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence team – Angie Atwell and Cristina Cottom. They unfortunately were not able to attend in person, so they are presenting with me from our Worldwide Headquarters in Daytona Beach, Florida. I will let them introduce themselves now.

\*Cristina and Angie introduce themselves\*



## Angie:

ERAU has a 3 campus system. There are two residential campuses, one in Daytona Beach,

Florida and the other  
in Prescott,  
Arizona. ERAU-  
Worldwide is the third  
arm of the university  
system. ERAU-W  
serves almost 22,000  
students. Many of  
these are non-  
traditional student,  
veteran or active

military personnel as well as first-time in college students. Students can choose to take face-to-face classes at one of our 142 campus locations around the world or through web-conferencing technology. The

majority of our courses are online. In 2016, we ran almost 8,000 course sections.

Our Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence is housed at our Worldwide Headquarters which is also located in Daytona

Beach, a few miles  
down the road from  
our campus  
location. However, the  
faculty we support are  
living and working all  
over the world. We  
have about 120 full  
time instructors and  
over 1700 adjunct  
faculty. Our center



provides on-boarding orientation and support for all instructors. It is required for them to begin teaching. Our team is tiny but mighty. Most of our team is right here in this session. Missing from this presentation

is Lisa, my partner and  
fellow Faculty  
Development Instructo  
r and Stacy our Grants  
Specialist. Between the  
5 of us we support all  
of the worldwide  
faculty, full-time,  
adjunct, those who  
have been teaching  
online for 25 years and

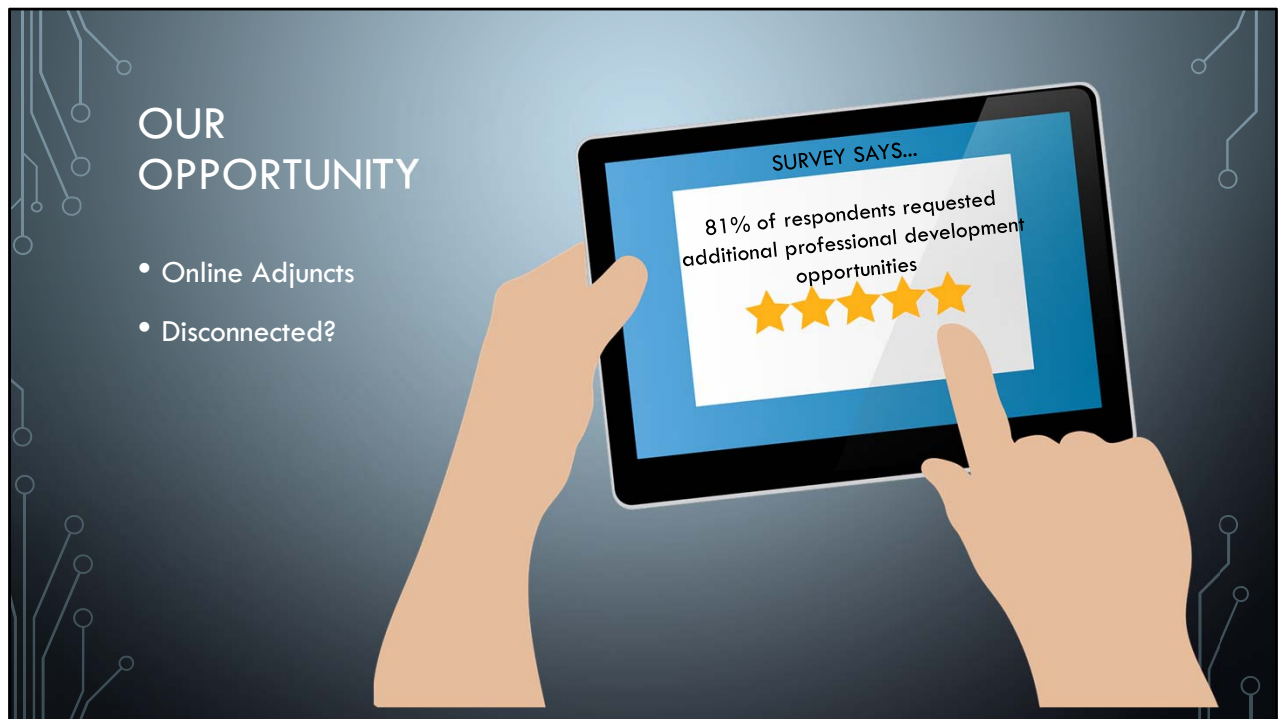
those who have never taught before. Our adjuncts, who are experts currently working in their field bring so much value to our courses. Since we have such a large adjunct pool, most of our effort focuses on our adjunct

faculty. Last year 86% of our course sections were taught by adjuncts. So focusing on them makes a real impact on the quality of our courses.

ERAU-W has been recognized for quality courses. This year we

earned the #1 slot for the Best Online bachelor's degree. We know we have some strengths and we are doing a lot of things well, but there is always room for improvement. Today's talk is an example an innovative project our

Center has been  
involved in over the  
last year or so.

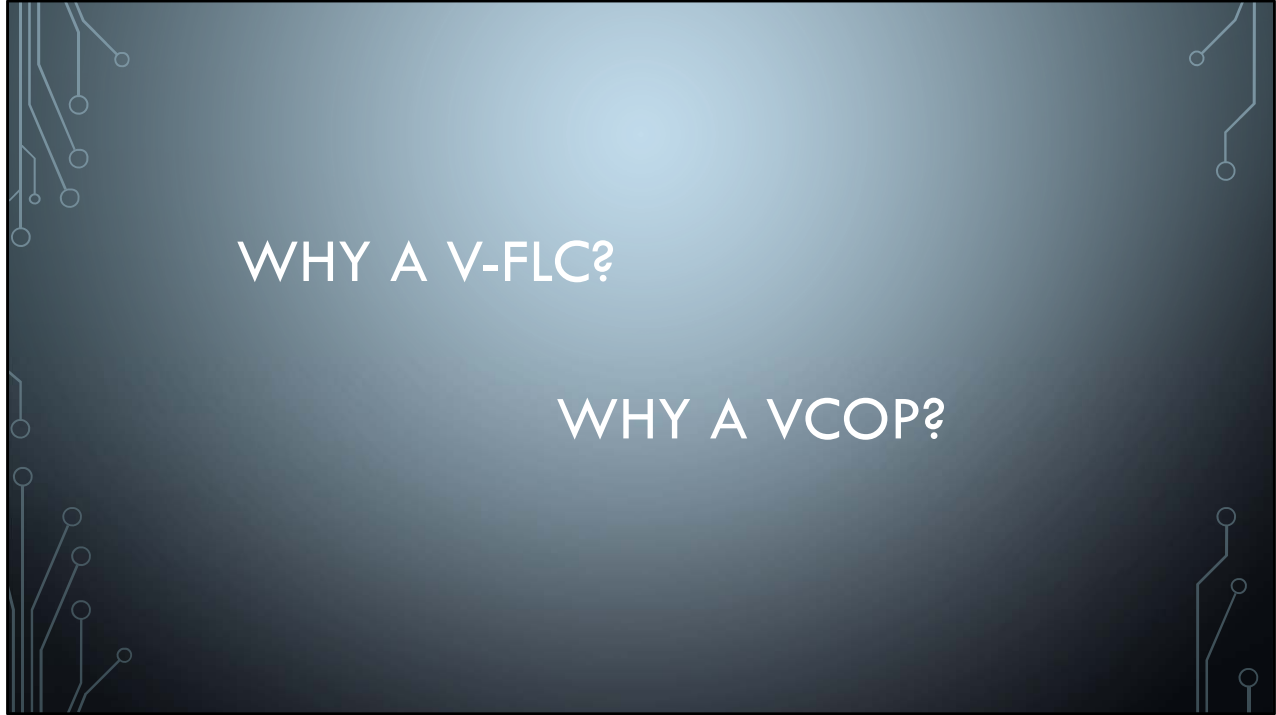


**Cristina:**

So, now that you know a little about us, let's take a look at the poll that everyone took before the session began..... These were really interesting results. So, we have some of you who are familiar with FLCs and some that are not as familiar.

When our team met to discuss creating a FLC in a virtual environment, we discussed several areas of opportunity. Every spring we send out a survey to get feedback from our faculty, and a reoccurring theme that we have heard is that our faculty want additional professional development opportunities that go beyond the onboarding courses they are required to complete. As Angie mentioned, a large number of our courses are taught by adjuncts at our campus and we wanted to reach out to them. However, we are not unique in this situation. We know from research that faculty members teaching online courses are typically in high demand, but feel disconnected from the institutions they teach for and from their colleagues (Dailey-Hebert, Norris, Mandernach, & Donnelly-Sallee, 2014).

We believed this was a problem at our campus since our faculty are located all over the world and we don't have a physical center to hold sessions in and everything is done virtually. So, we wanted to reach out to our online adjuncts and offer them a unique professional development opportunity, through a virtual FLC, that would increase their sense of belonging with us in CTLE and the institution.



**Sara:**

So, what got us interested in virtual faculty learning communities in the first place? As we began to grow and develop our Center, we were looking for opportunities to be able to engage with our faculty in unique faculty development experiences beyond what was required for them to complete prior to teaching. As Cristina and Angie mentioned, we have a lot of faculty at our campus, and a lot of them expressed interest in continuing opportunities. As I researched what other centers were doing, and attended conferences related to faculty development like POD and Lilly, I continued to hear more and more about FLCs and how beneficial they can be for faculty. However, we obviously don't have a physical center location we can invite faculty to come sit down around a table and talk through a topic, and our faculty aren't anywhere near on the same time zone even, so we knew the "traditional" FLC model wouldn't work for us. So I would reach out to people after their presentations to ask how they thought an FLC could work with our model. Often, the answer I got was "You know... that's a really good question." There was nothing in the literature about how to facilitate an FLC in a distributed model either. So, we decided to try it and see if it would work in our model with our faculty.

**Cristina:**

There are several similarities between an FLC and a CoP. The both can focus on academic topics. Typically, an FLC lasts an entire academic year and invites members through



application whereas the timeline for a VCoP is typically shorter, the leadership is more informal than a FLC, and the participants are invited to the experience. Although there are a few characteristics that differ, according to Sherer, Shea, and Kristensen an FLC is a CoP. We chose to call our experience a virtual community of practice because that is what we found in a lot of the literature that we read for our project proposal. Also, there have already been a few VCoPs, but they have been done in a synchronous environment, where ours was asynchronous. So, we wanted to build on that research.



**Angie:**

We took the data from our annual survey that Cristina mentioned and endeavored to create an optional, additional professional development experience for faculty, beyond our initial orientation. Adjunct instructors are such an integral part of our system, so we knew we wanted to include them. Since most of our courses are online it made sense to focus on effective online teaching practices for online adjunct instructors. Once we had our idea, we applied for and received the POD Network Early Researcher Grant. This provided us with some seed money to get the project started and some direction for our research. With these funds we purchased a book that we thought would be a useful reference for instructors as well as a nice incentive for those who participated. We did not offer stipends or anything. While we did provide a book, this was NOT a BOOK Club. The book was merely meant to be a jumping off point and it really served as such as we will talk about a little later. We sent a recruitment email out to all of our adjunct instructor who taught online. We really weren't sure what the response would be, but we were happy with what we got. In the grant, we agreed to offer the VCoP experience twice. Once in the Fall of 2016 and once in the Spring of 2017. In the Fall we had 20 adjuncts interested. FLCs recommend keeping group sizes around 8-12, so we created two groups. I facilitated one and my partner the other. In the Spring, we had 12 interested and 11 participated.

We used our Learning Management System (LMS) to create a space where participants

could share ideas, ask questions and just generally connect. We wanted to set the virtual space up in a way that was different from our faculty development courses and the courses they taught. As per the recommendations for Faculty Learning Communities, the experience was fairly open-ended. We utilized a number of tools within Canvas including announcements, where we, as the organizers answered questions and provided guidance. The discussions feature in Canvas was where most of the "magic" happened. The experience ran 8 weeks in total. For the first week, my partner and I modeled how to lead a weekly discussion. We took a topic from the book, provided a summary of it, asked participants to read about it and then posted a discussion prompt. For the remaining weeks (2-7), we asked participants to lead the discussion by posting a resource (that could be from the book, or not) and a discussion prompt while also contributing to the discussion throughout the week. The last week was left for submission of the culminating project – the Teaching Tip. This is intended to be a way for participants to reflect upon the experience and develop something that described some of their major take aways and things they want to share with other adjuncts who teach online. Those who completed the Teaching Tip were considered completers.

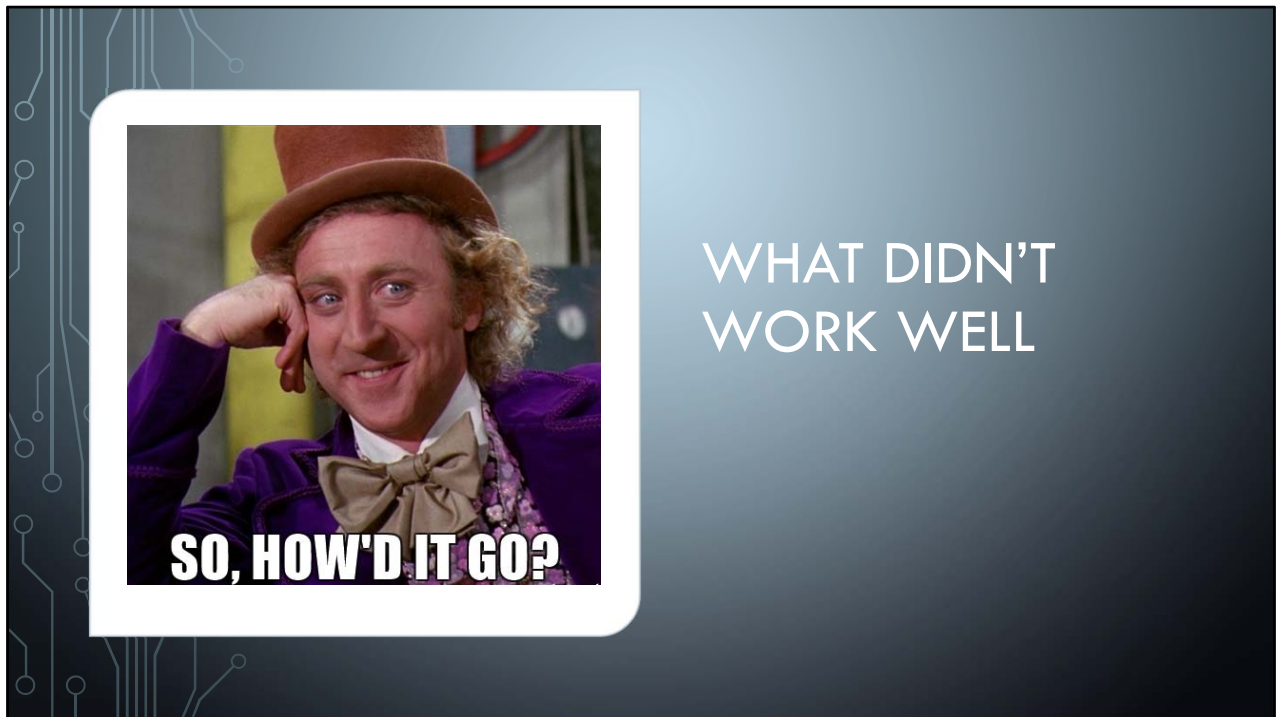
In the Fall, of the 18 total participants, 12 completed the teaching tip. In the Spring, all 11 participants completed the teaching tip. All those who completed were sent a Certificate of Completion which was signed by the CTLE Organizer as well as the ERAU-Worldwide Chancellor. So, that's what we did. For the remainder of this presentation, we will talk a little more about our experience and how you can use VFLCs/VCoPs at your institution.



**Sara**

So, now what we'd like for you to do is start to think through how this could potentially look at your institution. On each table is a stack of our handouts with a list of 12 questions. Take a couple of minutes to write down a few brief thoughts about questions 1, 2, and 3, and then share your initial responses with those at your table. If you've already facilitated FLCs at your institution before, this may be familiar to you.

We're excited and we're ready to go!!! What could possibly go wrong? Well, as always, there are things that just don't go well when you try something new for the first time.



**Cristina:**

Although we thought we had a great game plan for our first VFLC, there were some things that didn't work so well. We tried to structure this experience in a way that didn't look like the faculty development courses we facilitate, but our participants still perceived this professional development experience as a course. Despite the fact that we tried to set this experience up differently, we did utilize tools from Canvas that resemble a course. In addition, faculty are used to CTLE having a strong presence in our offerings and we try to model best practices in all that we do. However, in this experience we were not engaged in the discussions, which lead participants to believe that we disappeared. Although we were still active (sending announcements and answering questions), because the participants didn't see us engaging in the discussions they believe we dropped off.

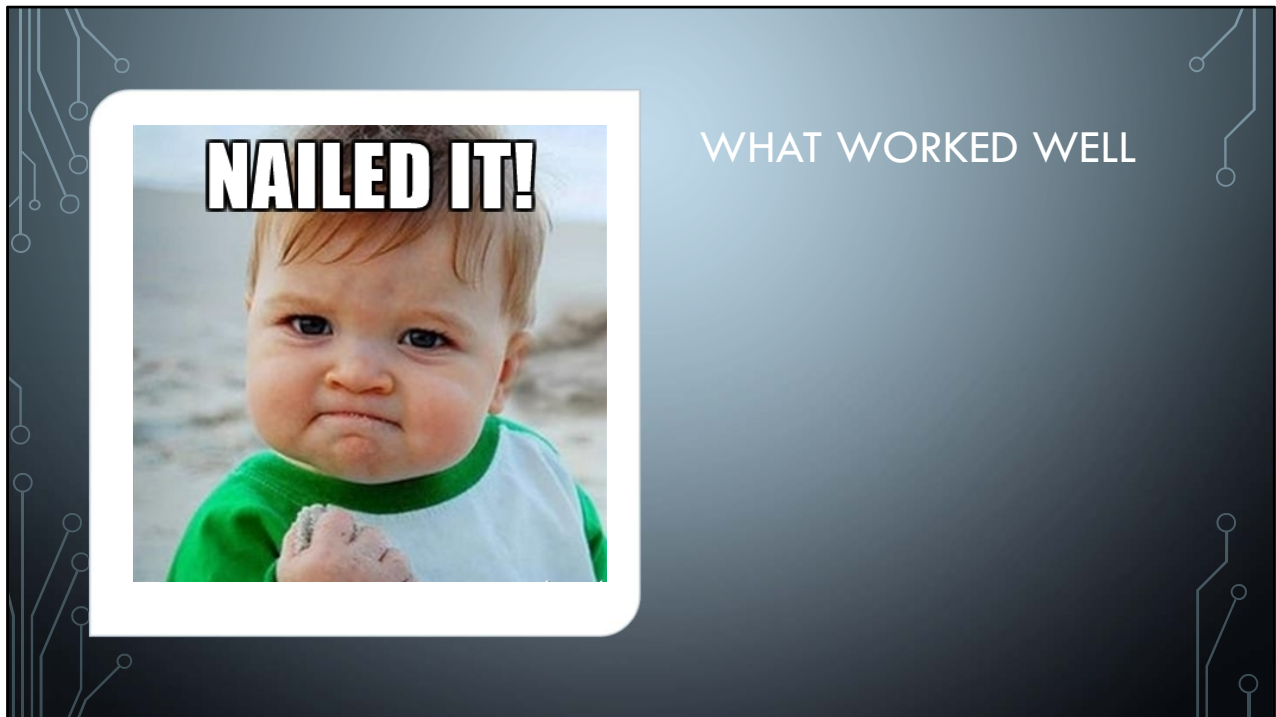
Another item that didn't work as well as we thought was our pre- and post-survey design. This was a research study and we wanted to determine if participation in this experience would increase a sense of belonging among the participants. However, what we discovered was that many of our participants already had a sense of belonging with the institution. Also, we realized that some of our questions on the survey were vague and could've been worded better.

Lastly, as Angie mentioned, our participants were asked to complete a Teaching Tip at the

end of this experience. We left this project open-ended and looked at it as the cumulating project for the end of the experience. However, we left his open-ended and allowed the participants to submit their tip in any medium. Due to this open-ended structure we received a variety of projects from a Prezi, to a few sentences, to a video. This made disseminating the Teaching Tip (which we stated we'd do) difficult.

**Sara:**

- Differences in how we engage (give an example of how easy is it to talk and collaborate when you're face to face, but that is much more challenging in a virtual environment)
  - Also address how we're presenting (Sara physically there and Angie and Cristina are virtually there)



**Angie:**

The thing that worked the best was the faculty experience. Almost 40% (9 of 23) of those that participated in last years VCoP are participating in this year's VCoP. So, they found it meaningful and worthwhile. As faculty developers this is really the most important thing.

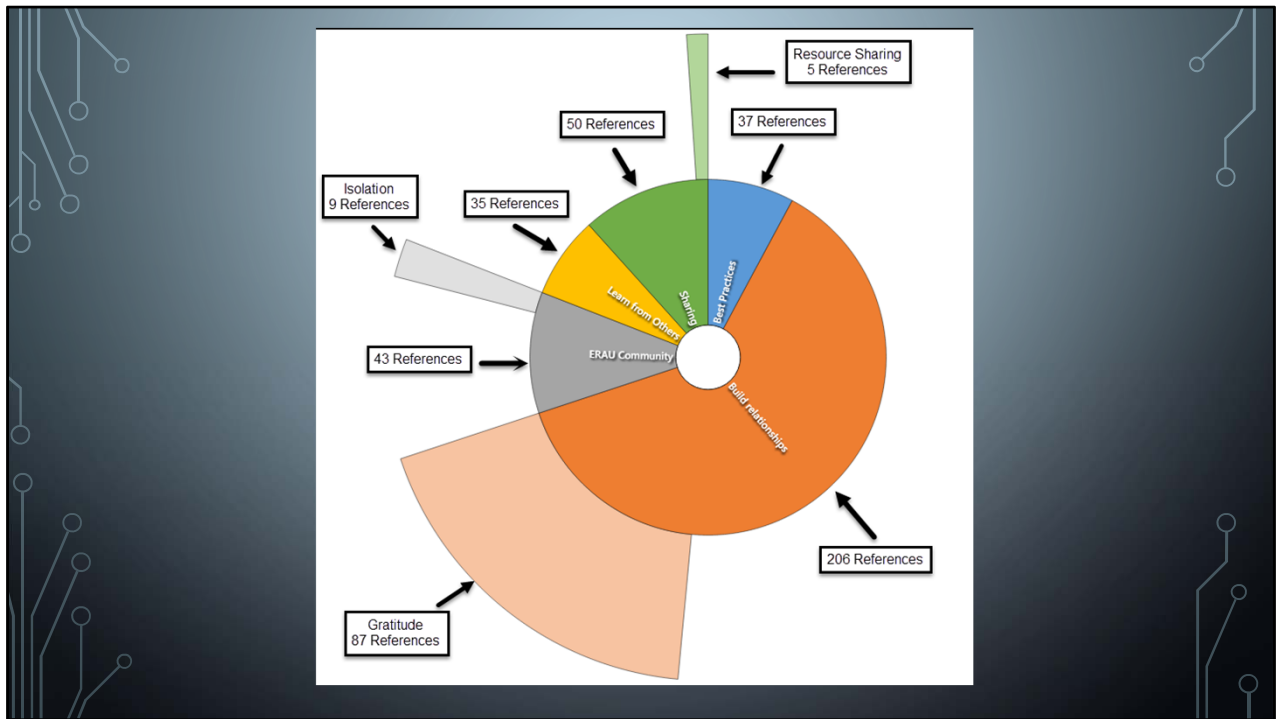
Our organization as a team also worked well. In the Fall, the three of us, Cristina and the two organizers met weekly to address questions and trouble shoot problems. We didn't have to meet nearly as much in the Spring because we had most of the bugs worked out from the fall. We also used our experiences, reflection and notes to develop a framework to help others create a Virtual Community of Practice. Sara will talk more about that a little later.

Finally, the discussion topics were really interesting. While many of the conversations focused on strategies or ideas from the book, a lot of conversations also branched out to topics that were also of interest to online adjunct instructors. (transition to next slide)





many discussion focused on online learning, since that was our focus.



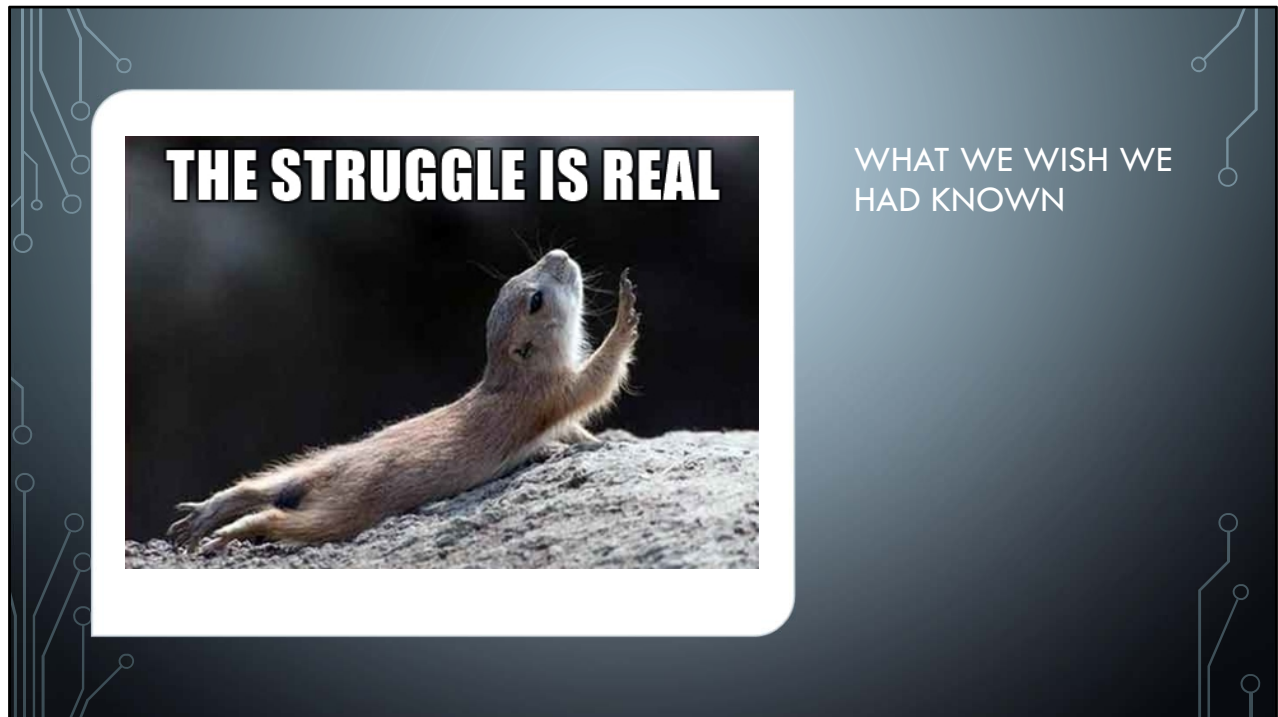
**Cristina:**

As I stated earlier, this was a research project. We used a mixed-methods methodology. As previously mentioned, we ran into some unanticipated problems with our pre- and post-survey results, so our quantitative analysis wasn't as strong as we'd hoped, but our qualitative results were very promising. We gathered all of our notes from our weekly meetings, emails, and the discussions from the participants and conducted a thematic analysis. You're able to see from this figure, the prominent themes. The major themes that were found are Building Relationships, Sharing, University Community, Best Practices, and Learn from Others. What we found from our analysis we discovered that the participants enjoyed the opportunity to engage with their colleagues and wanted the conversations to continue past the FLC experience. So, we created a VIP VCoP group for all completers to continue their discussions.



**Sara**

Now take some time and go back to the handout and answer questions 8 and 10 - how will your structure your V-FLC? What will your facilitator(s) role be with your V-FLC?



**Angie:**

This turned out to be a pretty significant project. For us it involved a grant funded research project, the actual experience design and implementation as well as a framework development. We added all of those responsibilities into our already busy schedules (remember 5 people supporting almost 2000 faculty). So the time commitment was more than we anticipated initially. However the time commitment definitely decreased the more times we offered it.

This project was a very big step into researching a faculty development experience. I don't know that we anticipated how much we would struggle with the different purposes of reach of these roles. Obviously we felt compelled to design a valid research study with reliable results but we also wanted to be sure the faculty development experience was high quality. Sometimes these two identities caused a little rift. There were times that what we wanted as faculty developers just didn't jive with what could be done within the confines of the research project. For example, when a faculty member wanted to leave the experience, I as the faculty developer felt compelled to outline all the benefits of continued participation and convince him to stay. However, in a research project, you have to allow participants to leave at any time. As faculty developers we also REALLY wanted to participate in these discussions, but we said we wouldn't in the proposal, we couldn't.

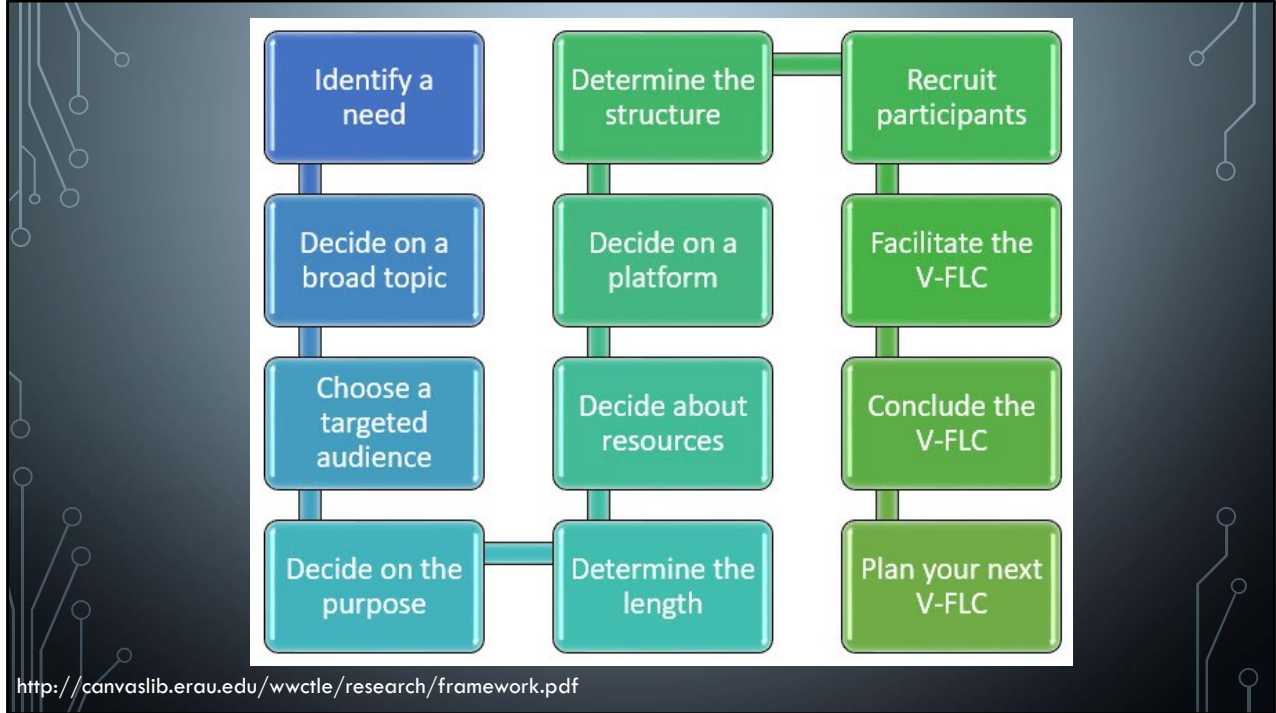
While we struggled throughout the process, the benefits far outweighed the challenges and we are so excited to be sharing these thoughts with you today and through our future activities that Cristina will talk about now.



**Cristina**

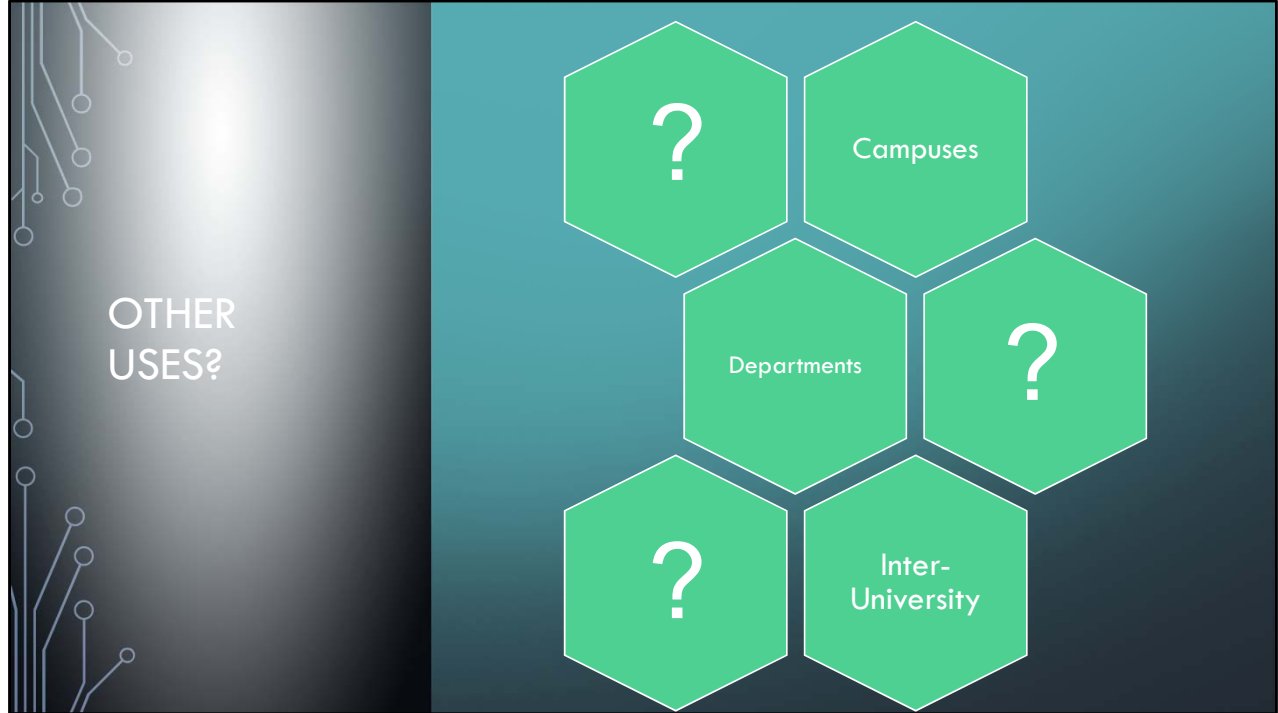
Currently, we are running a new VCoP using VoiceThread and Magna publication videos, which was funded through a POD Network Researcher grant. However, this iteration is open to all faculty (full-time and adjunct), teaching in any modality. As we move forward we will be gathering more research on the implementation of VFLCs as well as updating our Framework, which Sara will discuss further.

In addition, once this year's POD grant has ended, we will continue offering VFLCs for our faculty. We will continue to learn from these experiences and make changes to provide our faculty with a great professional development experience. For example, we may provide more structure and more engagement from the CTLE faculty development instructors.



**Sara**

So as Cristina mentioned, we did put together a framework based on our experiences that other institutions could use to implement a V-FLC at their own institution. The link to the full framework is available on the handout at each table if you'd like to go visit it. Essentially, we designed our framework around 12 steps; each of the 12 steps corresponds to one of the 12 questions on your handout. So feel free to take this handout back to your institution and use it as a guide as you think through if a V-FLC would be useful for you and your faculty.



Sara

Now, obviously our V-FLC was borne out of necessity. We don't have a physical center, and our faculty are remote across all different time zones. However, we see a lot of applications for how V-FLCs could be used at other types of institutions, even those who may also have the ability to offer more of the "traditional" FLC model. A couple of applications we could think of would be for those universities that offer multiple campuses; connect your faculty without having them drive across town or across the state. Also, maybe you just have a large campus and it isn't feasible for your faculty to trek over from some of the more distant departments/buildings, or perhaps some of your faculty work more at night/on the weekends versus during the day. There also could be some great applications for inter-university FLCs. For example, wouldn't it be great if we set up a similar model to this for faculty developers to reach out and connect and learn from each other? Imagine if you could coordinate something like this with your faculty and other faculty teaching similar content at different universities?



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Text ATWELL123 to 22333

How can a V-FLC  
work for you?

The image is a light blue rectangular graphic with a thin black border. It features decorative circuit-like lines and nodes in the corners. At the top left, there is a laptop icon. Below it, the text 'PolIEV.com/atwell123' is displayed. To the left of the text 'Text ATWELL123 to 22333' is a smartphone icon. In the center, a white rectangular box with a black border contains the question 'How can a V-FLC work for you?' in blue text.

These are just a few examples of other applications for V-FLCs. Now, we'd like to hear how a V-FLC could work for you. Go back to our initial poll and share – this is an open-ended response. Type in a few words or a sentence to describe how this could work for you. As those answers are coming in, we'd like to open it up for questions as well!



**Sara**

That wraps up our session. We've covered a lot of content, and I'm sure there are some questions you may have. We are happy to stick around for a few minutes after as well although we want to be mindful of the people presenting after us. I do have each of our cards up here too if you'd like to grab one to follow up with any of us later on as well. Our generic department email is also listed on the handout. Thank you for your participation in our session!