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A Collaborative Professional Development Approach to Improving Student Outcomes

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze the strategy used to develop a collaborative professional development process that focused on the implementation of the common core state standards. In addition, the author will report findings, and discuss the effectiveness of the initiative for postsecondary faculty. Faculty can verify that not every student comes to a two or four year college program prepared to succeed in credit bearing coursework. To facilitate improvement of student success, states across the country collaborated with teachers, researchers and leading experts to design and develop the common core state standards. The standards were developed to ensure that all students, regardless of where they live, are well prepared with the skills and knowledge essential to collaborate and compete with their peers (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). Kentucky was the first state to adopt the Common Core Standards, and beginning in 2010 a large scale effort was developed to provide faculty with information about how implementation of the standards could affect postsecondary education. To address the need for information about the Common Core Standards, representatives from Kentucky institutes of higher education (IHE) collaborated in the development and delivery of information about the Common Core Standards.

Keywords: collaboration, professional development, common core, student outcomes

Within higher education, collaboration has been suggested as a way to enhance student learning (Knefelkamp, 1991; Love & Love, 1995), and studies of particular collaborations, including interdisciplinary teaching (Turner, 1998; Smith & McCann, 2001) and learning communities (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Smith & McCann, 2001), demonstrate that they enhance student performance in such areas as grade point average, persistence and learning outcomes.

Institutions are becoming more aware of the need to increase efficiency and effectiveness through all types of partnerships (business, industry, collegial) as well as initiating cross-disciplinary faculty communities. While little has been written about how to foster collaboration within higher education (Martin & Murphy, 2000), research confirms that collaborative efforts among experienced stakeholders can be an

impetus to transformation (Kezar, 2006; Love & Love, 1995; Knefelkamp, 1991). Ideally, collaboration leverages one of the most valuable resources available to any organization: its specialized and knowledgeable personnel. Similarly, collaboration across institutions or agencies can make the best use of the effective organization and existent capacity to leverage directed reform at other levels. As expertise is redirected, it will likely develop and reorganize in accordance with the higher-order objectives it is meant to realize, adding stability to the reformulated structures and processes.

The goal of this study is to describe the strategy used to develop a collaborative professional development initiative that focuses on the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, present findings from evaluation of the professional

development, and discuss the effectiveness of the initiative for postsecondary faculty.

The Design

To meet statewide professional development needs at the postsecondary level, an inclusive, parallel approach was designed to provide faculty with options to access resources and information through online information modules, institutes of higher education (IHE) grants, and statewide workshops collaboratively developed by four education entities. Although these ran in parallel fashion, they complemented and reinforced each other in terms of content and outcomes for common audiences.

Online modules were developed by the state higher education agency in collaboration with university and college faculty members across departments and schools to provide information about Senate Bill 1 (2009) and the Common Core Standards in English language arts and mathematics. They were designed to provide information around the Common Core State Standards for faculty who teach freshman year or introductory courses and education faculty who train future teachers. Prior to development of the modules, postsecondary faculty were surveyed to assess and identify existing knowledge regarding the legislation, pedagogies for highly effective teaching and learning, and infusion of core academic content standards for reading and mathematics for introductory courses in postsecondary education institutions. Based on the responses to the survey, content for the modules was developed to address the gaps in knowledge and provide examples of best practices.

The IHE proposals to receive non-competitive grants were submitted by each of the eight public universities, the community college system, and the private college and university association to provide

professional development around college- and career-readiness and implementing the Common Core Standards. The grant funding proposal emphasized and encouraged collaboration between public and private institutions and K-12 schools. Using funds from the grant, institutions and their collaborating partners developed workshops, professional learning communities, and resources to help faculty understand the requirements of the legislation and the responsibilities of the campuses regarding the implementation of the Common Core Standards.

The statewide workshops and webinars were collaboratively developed for postsecondary faculty and administrators by four independent education entities. The objectives of the workshops were to share information about implementing the Common Core Standards in English language arts and mathematics, discuss changes in assessment and accountability, and highlight the significance of aligning standards and assessment for postsecondary education. Academic content and college of education faculty and administrators from the state's public and private colleges and universities, as well as some elementary and secondary teachers and district administrators, participated in these events.

Evaluation of the Effort

From the beginning of the planning process, evaluation of the effort was incorporated into the professional development design. A university-based data evaluation office was assigned the task of designing the evaluation criteria and methodologies. The evaluation team utilized investigator triangulation and methodological triangulation. To address investigator triangulation, two separate investigators examined the effects of the professional development implementation.

To address methodological triangulation, two discrete survey instruments were designed to gather evidence; the first was distributed six weeks after the initial event and the second six months after the event. Using Guskey's (2002) five levels of professional development evaluation model to guide the process, the first survey focused on adequacy of the professional development describing participant reaction and learning, while the second survey focused on degree of impact describing participant use of new knowledge, student outcomes, and organizational support.

Adequacy of the Professional Development

Information on participants' reactions to the professional development opportunities and what participants learned was gathered through an online survey of those who took part in each of the three different professional development formats: (a) online modules, (b) IHE activities and projects, and (c) statewide workshops and webinars. A link to the survey was sent to participants via email approximately six weeks after they completed the sessions. No effort was made to distinguish among sessions or formats. One hundred and ninety-six participants completed the survey at the point when the data was collected.

The survey consisted of rating-scale and open-ended items developed by the evaluation team. For clarity, responses were combined to simply "Agree" and "Disagree." These data show that the vast majority of those who participated in the professional development considered the sessions to be a valuable learning experience. The highest-rated items related to the clarity of goals and objectives, session planning and organization, and access to needed materials and resources. This indicates that sessions were clear in their

intent, well organized, and provided participants with all necessary materials and resources. The lowest-rated items concerned the efficient and effective use of training time, and participants' ability to apply what they learned. Even so, approximately 75% of participants offered positive responses to these items.

The first open-ended item asked participants, "How did you benefit from participating in this Senate Bill 1 (2009) and the Common Core Standards learning experience?" Eighty-five percent (85%) of participants offered positive comments on this item, most stating that the sessions provided an excellent overview and helped deepen their understanding of the implications of legislative mandates and the Common Core Standards. The few negative comments appeared to come from participants already familiar with the legislative mandates and the standards who felt the sessions offered little new information.

The second open-ended item asked participants, "How do you anticipate that this learning experience will impact student learning and success in your classroom?" Although the majority of participants offered positive comments, many of these indicated that rather than changing their teaching, the effort would likely help high school teachers better prepare students for college-level work and, hence, improve college instruction. About 30% of participants indicated that the training was not applicable to their teaching or would not influence their teaching.

In a final open-ended response item participants were asked to identify how the learning experience could be improved. The comments offered on this item focused primarily on the session format or content. Specifically, participants suggested that the sessions be more inclusive and interactive,

offer more time for questioning and discussion, and employ a wider variety of learning activities. Regarding the content, participants overwhelmingly stressed the importance of practicality. Many mentioned the need for more practical classroom examples, more detailed suggestions of instructional activities, and more emphasis on specific teaching and assessment practices that participants could implement.

Impact of the Professional Development

Without targeting infrastructure change, sustainability relies on maintaining momentum achieved during a learning experience. To evaluate the impact of the professional development, a second survey was distributed electronically approximately six months after participant's experience with one or more of the professional development formats: (a) online modules, (b) IHE activities and projects, and (c) statewide workshops and webinars. As with the initial survey, no effort was made to distinguish among sessions or formats. One hundred and fifty-seven participants completed the second survey at the point when the data was collected.

The first section in the survey focused on identifying activities and contributions the participants' engaged in up to six months after the training experience. The majority of participants (78%) identified that they kept reviewing training materials, and 86% of the participants identified that they continued discussion with colleagues, campus leaders and policy makers. While some participants (65%) offered advice related to the standards and assessment to colleagues, institutions or organizations, 26% disclosed that they helped develop tools such as glossaries, booklets and digests, and 31% used technology such as multimedia and social media such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs.

The next section measured the degree of networking and collaboration among participants. Over half of the participants (54%) indicated that they took part in efforts to bring together colleagues across campus, and 44% disclosed that they met new campus colleagues who they would not have otherwise met during this process. In addition to participating in campus related activities, 31% of participants identified that they engaged in bringing colleagues together from other institutions across the state, as well as from other states, to work on Common Core State Standards related issues, and disclosed that they had the opportunity to work with new colleagues because of this experience.

The third section focused on institutional support and perceived sustainable opportunities to continue the efforts. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of participants perceived institutional support, and 59% took part in regular meetings to discuss issues related to implementation of the Common Core Standards. The majority of participants (80%) participated in departmental discussion regarding the implications of the Common Core State Standards, and 54% of participants identified that they were part of a coordinated effort to align courses with the Common Core State Standards and assessments. While 60% of participants disclosed that collaborative structures have been established to continue the work, 50% saw evidence of cultural change, and 30% felt that the work was valuable in relation to merit, tenure, and promotion.

The fourth section described the impact on teaching, and measured the degree that participants aligned course materials to the Common Core State Standards. Seventy percent (70%) of participants believed that the learning experience prepared them to align their

courses, and 61% indicated that they were also prepared to model application of the Common Core State Standards for their students. In the six months since the learning experience, 53% of participants had implemented course materials and strategies, and 86% saw their students engaged in Common Core Standards-related activities in their courses. Thirty-seven percent (37%) identified that their students contributed to the development of tools and technology for the implementation of the common core state standards and assessment, 51% saw improvement in attitudes toward learning among their students, and 49% saw an improvement in learning outcomes.

The final section targeted the impact on scholarship and service. Forty-seven percent (47%) of participants believed their learning experience related to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and assessments provided issues worthy of academic investigation, and 41% identified that the issues discussed will become an important part of their scholarly activities in the near future. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of participants consider the issues related to implementing the Common Core State Standards worthy of discussion in the committees in which they are involved, 59% plan to seek opportunities to connect their work on the committees with the implementation, and 64% deem the overall learning experience a worthwhile effort contributing to their work.

Discussion

The majority of faculty who responded to the adequacy of training survey related favorably to the professional development activities and felt that the information presented in the sessions was valuable. Those already familiar with the information expressed concern about the depth of the information and may have

found it helpful to better understand the level of knowledge (beginner, intermediate or advanced) being presented. The degree of impact survey expanded on the extent to which participants were applying information learned from the professional development opportunities in the classroom, the impact this was having on student outcomes, and the level of institutional support that provided opportunities to continue the efforts. Faculty identified that they are seeing improvement in learning outcomes, and are encouraging their students to develop resources to support the implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

This study described how internal and external collaboration was employed, and how faculty made new connections with internal and external colleagues in the six months preceding the professional development opportunity. The survey did not, however, give details regarding the objectives or outcomes of these new collaborations, and additional research regarding these connections is needed.

Conclusion

Not every student comes to a two- or four-year college program prepared to succeed in credit-bearing coursework, and looking at the degree of impact from the results, it is possible to make several assumptions. First, collaborative opportunities – internal and external to an institution – can provide faculty with new information and resources to enhance instruction. Second, access to new information and resources facilitates improvement in student engagement and learning, which can lead to improved student outcomes. Finally, it is important to identify ways to sustain collaboration in order to leverage resources and transform education at all levels of learning.

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