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# A MODEL FOR PUTTING A TEACHING CENTER IN CONTEXT

AN INFORMAL COMPARISON OF TEACHING  
CENTERS AT LARGER STATE UNIVERSITIES

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*Wesley H. Dotson, Daniel J. Bernstein, University of Kansas*

*An informal comparative analysis of teaching centers at larger state universities around the United States was conducted as part of a self-initiated ten-year review of our center. We compared centers along several dimensions, among them programs, resources, and size. This chapter offers our methods, results, and general impressions of the process as an example for others who might decide to conduct a similar analysis.*

“So what are you doing, and how does that fit into the context of other teaching centers across the country?” The Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas considered that question last year when it was asked by our faculty advisory board while we were conducting a self-initiated ten-year review of the center. The advisory board wanted to know how the center compared to peer institutions along several dimensions, among them size, audience, types of services offered, resources, and faculty involvement.

We knew from informal conversations with peer institutions and being a part of the POD Network that teaching centers exist in a variety of forms and sizes. Some centers are small, with directors and staff splitting appointments with other departments. Other centers have dedicated directors and

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First and foremost, we would like to thank all of the centers and their staff who shared their time and effort in gathering this information. Without them this project would not exist. Many thanks also to Judy Eddy for her patience and guidance throughout this project.

a staff of dozens of people. Centers play a role in technology support on campus, the formal teaching evaluation process, or participation in campus and systemwide teaching initiatives. Knowledge of the diversity of teaching center structure and philosophy presented a daunting challenge in answering our advisory board's question. To attempt to describe all of the various approaches to running a teaching center across the many types of academic environments in which they exist was beyond both the scope of our inquiry and our resources as a single center. Therefore, we hoped only to situate ourselves into the narrower context of teaching centers at large, state universities. We hoped that the process could be expedited by locating a central database of information about how centers of various sizes and types existed within their academic contexts, but such a resource could not be located. We did not find any published comparative reviews of similar teaching centers along the dimensions identified by our advisory board; nor did we locate an online database with any comprehensive information about centers of any size or type. Instead, we relied on the generosity of our colleagues at other centers to help us answer the question.

Fortunately, the review occurred in the context of strong local support for the center, and we were able to use the process of answering the question as a reflective and formative experience. We offer a description of our work here as an example of a method other centers might adapt to their needs to engage in similar projects, not as a definitive database or comprehensive resource. We undertook this analysis to answer our own specific questions, but the approach could be used by others, or it might suggest development of an ongoing collaborative pool of information about centers.

## Collection of Information

We identified an initial pool of thirty-five teaching centers at peer institutions from which to gather information. We selected peer institutions on the basis of demographic similarity (larger state universities) and other characteristics (schools in the conference, presence of programs comparable to and complementary to our center goals). We chose our sample to allow us to gather the information our advisory board wanted in a timely fashion, not to compile an exhaustive list (we did not include many fine centers). Including many additional centers in the comparison would have offered small marginal benefit in our minds relative to the large increase in time and effort required to gather the information.

Following identification of the target centers, we developed a list of the information we needed from each center to answer the question posed by

our advisory board. The advisory board wanted to know how our center compared to others around the United States in several areas. To facilitate finding that information, we developed a series of questions to be answered about each target center (see Exhibit 5.1). We designed the questions as a guide for exploring target centers and as a prompt for dialogue with a representative of each comparison center. The information

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### Exhibit 5.1. Interview Questions for Teaching Centers

#### Programs

- What three or four programs do you and your staff spend the most time on?
- What percentage of your staff's time is spent on these key programs?
- What audiences do you serve (tenure-track faculty, adjuncts, GTAs)?
- Do you offer grants or funding for course and teaching development? If so, how do they work?
- Do you have a role in technology training or support for faculty? If so, what percentage of your budget and staff time is spent on this?
- Do you have a role in administering or analyzing teacher evaluations for your university? If so, what percentage of your budget and staff time is spent on this?

#### Faculty Connections

- Do any faculty members have paid appointments with your center? If so, how do they work?
- Are faculty members reimbursed or paid for participating in your programs? If so, how does that work?

#### Staffing

- How many full-time staff members work at your center?
- How many part-time, and what is the full-time equivalent of all of them?

#### Resources and Budget

- What percentage of your budget is spent on your key programs (from Programs questions)?
- Are any of these programs funded by private sources?
- What percentage of your total budget is supplied by your institution, and what percentage by private funds (if any)?

#### GTA Preparation

- Is a course on teaching offered by your center for GTAs?
- If yes, do you design and oversee the course, or is it taught in partnership with another department or administrative unit?

#### Communication

- How do faculty members find out about what you're doing? What avenues of communication do you have in place?
- How do you communicate your work to your institution's administrators?

#### Conclusion

- Is there any other information you'd like for us to know about your center?

requested and gathered reflected the unique goals of our self-study and the advisory board's question. Other centers doing similar work would customize the questions they ask to elicit conversations about the issues and information they want to explore.

After creating our list of questions, we visited each center's website to gather as much information as possible. We did this both as a means of familiarizing ourselves with each center's programs and philosophy and as a way to answer as many questions as we could before asking colleagues to spend time talking to us. As the review of the websites progressed, it became apparent that the detailed information required to make an accurate comparison among centers could not be gathered by browsing alone. In addition, we discovered that four of the target universities did not have a currently active teaching center, so those universities were excluded from the study.

We then contacted the directors of the remaining thirty-one centers, explained the purpose of our review, and asked if they would be willing to converse by email or phone to fill in the gaps in the information we had collected about their center. If they responded positively, then we arranged a contact time and sent the directors copies of our questions (with a note about the information we still needed to gather) to allow them time to prepare relevant materials and facilitate an efficient conversation. Some interviewees e-mailed answers to the questions, while others spent twenty to thirty minutes on the phone with a graduate assistant to provide the requested information.

Seventeen centers completed the interview questions either by email or by phone. Several other centers that indicated willingness to share information could not be included in the final analysis, because of inability to schedule an interview time before the deadline for completing the self-study for our advisory board. Overall, eighteen centers (including ours) are represented in the comparative data reported here. Because responding centers had the option of not answering every interview question, some comparisons do not include all of the responding centers.

### **Centers Represented in Comparative Information**

University of Arizona: University Teaching Center

Arizona State University: Center for Learning and Teaching Excellence

University of Georgia: Center for Teaching and Learning

University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign: Center for Teaching Excellence

Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis: Center for Teaching and Learning

Iowa State University: Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching

University of Kansas: Center for Teaching Excellence

Kansas State University: Center for Advancement of Teaching and Learning

Kennesaw State University: Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

University of Michigan: Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

University of Minnesota: Center for Teaching and Learning

University of North Carolina: Center for Teaching and Learning

Ohio State University: Faculty and TA Development

University of Oklahoma: Program for Instructional Innovation

University of Oregon: Teaching Effectiveness Program

Penn State University: Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence

Texas Christian University: Koehler Center for Teaching Excellence

Texas Tech University: Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center

## Analysis of Information

In general, we present our findings as the percentage of centers meeting certain criteria related to the information our advisory board wanted to know. We used functional criteria, such as the presence of certain types of programs and audiences served, and also resource criteria, such as staffing size or budget sources. See Tables 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 for a detailed explanation of the comparative criteria used in our self-study report. Evaluations of each criterion reflect binary decisions (yes or no only) rather than a nuanced spectrum of services that centers might offer. For example, a center offering a single \$2,500 grant program would receive the same *yes* for the criterion “offers grant funding for programs” that a center with six grant programs would receive. Because of the diversity in approaches across centers, however, such simplification was necessary to bring coherence to the data.

In evaluating centers according to size, we compared centers according to the ratio of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff each center had per thousand students (both undergraduate and graduate). This measure yielded a more comparable representation of center size. We attempted to calcu-

**Table 5.1. Criteria for Program-Based Comparison**

| <b>Criterion</b>  | <b>Definition</b>  |
|---|--|
| Role in technology support or training                    | We scored a <i>yes</i> if the center had any programs or staff dedicated to installing, maintaining, or training staff in the use of educational technology such as overheads, software, computer networks, etc.                           |
| Role in administration or analysis of teacher evaluations | We scored as <i>yes</i> any center that played an active part in the formal teacher evaluation process on their campus. We scored as <i>no</i> any center that simply consulted with individual faculty about their teacher evaluations.   |
| Serves GTAs as well as faculty                            | We scored a <i>yes</i> for a center if it had any programs open to GTAs or marketed to them. Such programs might include beginning-of-year orientation, consulting services, or inclusion on campus mailing lists about center activities. |
| Offers a course on college teaching for GTAs              | We scored a <i>yes</i> for a center if such a course was present and being offered through the center, or a center staff member was responsible for the teaching of the course through other campus departments.                           |
| Furnishes annual report to university administration      | We scored a <i>yes</i> for a center if it submitted a yearly report to someone in the university administration. We did not distinguish types, length, or content of the report.   |

late the same proportion relative to the number of faculty members at the university, but universities defined their faculty positions differently so the reported numbers were ambiguous and difficult to compare. Division of centers by FTE into three groups was an arbitrary decision made to allow us to more easily represent data visually.

It proved difficult to gather information about the specific operating budgets of the cooperating centers. Rather than a comparison of resources measured in dollar amounts, we simply gathered information about various types of indicators (grants, faculty reimbursement, faculty appointments in the center, outside funding sources, and so on) as indicators of the functions served by resources allotted to the center.

## Summary of Results

Table 5.4 shows that most centers use financial incentives to support faculty participation in programming. Although the funding is sometimes in grants to support particular projects, there are also funding programs that give a stipend or access to operating budgets as a thank-you to

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**Table 5.2. Criteria for Resource-Based Comparisons**

| <b>Criterion</b>   | <b>Definition</b>   |
|--|---|
| Offers grant funding for programs                            | We scored a <i>yes</i> if the center had programs for which faculty received grant funding through the center. We did not score programs in which centers assisted faculty in securing grants from other organizations or outside funding agencies.   |
| Have faculty partners who assist in meeting center goals     | We scored a <i>yes</i> if the center had faculty members working with them who received either a teaching release or a portion of their salary for time spent in the center working directly on meeting center goals.                                 |
| Reimbursement for faculty participation in programs          | We scored a <i>yes</i> if the center offered any monetary compensation to faculty for participating in center programs. Such compensation might include stipends for completing workshops, travel reimbursements to attend conferences, and the like. |
| Any part of budget comes from noninstitutional sources       | We scored a <i>yes</i> if the center received any money from noninstitutional sources such as foundations, endowments, or private donations.  |
| More than 10 percent of budget from noninstitutional sources | We scored a <i>yes</i> if more than 10 percent of the center's operating budget (as reported by the center) came from noninstitutional sources.   |

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**Table 5.3. Criteria for Size-Based Comparisons**

| <b>Criterion</b>                            | <b>Definition</b>   |
|---|---|
| Center has 0.10–0.25 FTE per 1,000 students | We scored a <i>yes</i> if the center had no more than the equivalent of one full-time position for every 4,000 students at the university.  |
| Center has 0.26–0.50 FTE per 1,000 students | We scored a <i>yes</i> if the center had no more than the equivalent of one full-time position for every 2,000 students at the university and no less than one full-time position for every 4,000 students at the university. |
| Center has > 0.50 FTE per 1,000 students    | We scored a <i>yes</i> if the center had more than the equivalent of one full-time position for every 2,000 students at the university.   |

*Note:* We distinguished among three sizes of center arbitrarily to allow us to draw comparisons about types of programs offered relative to center size.



**Table 5.4. Summary Report of Teaching Center Functions**

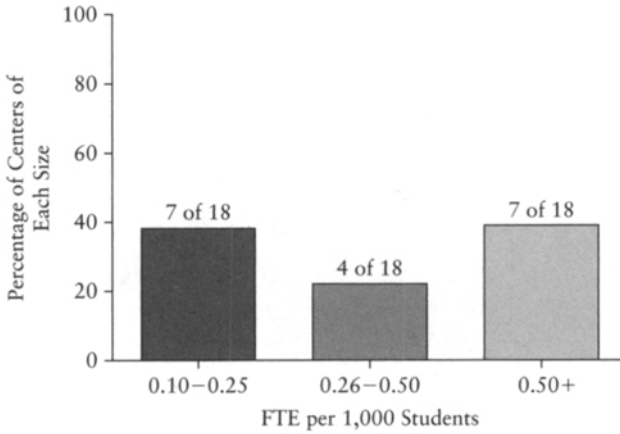
| Descriptor  | Percentage of Centers |
|---|-----------------------|
| Offers grant funding for programs                         | 72 (13 of 18)         |
| Have faculty partners who assist in meeting center goals  | 56 (10 of 18)         |
| Reimbursement for faculty participation in programs       | 50 (9 of 18)          |
| Provides role in technology support or training           | 72 (13 of 18)         |
| Role in administration or analysis of teacher evaluations | 33 (3 of 9)           |
| Serves GTAs as well as faculty                            | 89 (16 of 18)         |
| Offers a course on college teaching for GTAs              | 72 (13 of 18)         |
| Annual report to university administration                | 83 (15 of 18)         |
| Any part of budget comes from noninstitutional sources    | 47 (8 of 17)          |
| More than 10% of budget from noninstitutional sources     | 18 (3 of 17)          |

faculty for engaging in workshops or ongoing faculty communities in the center. The data also show that the vast majority of centers work with graduate teaching assistants as well, sometimes in collaboration with the local graduate school or with departments. Further, the data show that even though almost half of the responding centers receive some portion of their budget from noninstitutional sources, few of them rely on such funding as a significant portion of their resources.

Figure 5.1 shows the percentage of centers in three categories of size, expressed as the ratio of staff positions to the number of students on a campus. There is no absolute meaning to any of these categories, but the range of personnel resources is interesting to note. It was useful to us in our self-study, because we were able to place our own center in the context of what other universities provided in support of faculty development.

Figure 5.2 shows the percentage of centers with a role in technology support or training by the size of the center, measured by a staff-per-student ratio. Within our sample, an increasingly larger proportion of centers had a role in technology as the size of the center increased. It is likely that the higher allocation of staff positions in larger centers may be partially a result of keeping several staff members in the center whose primary responsibilities revolve around training in and maintaining educational technology. Figure 5.2 also shows one way we represented our data to the advisory board, as a quick visual reference for one of our primary findings.

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**Figure 5.1. Percentage of Centers by Size**



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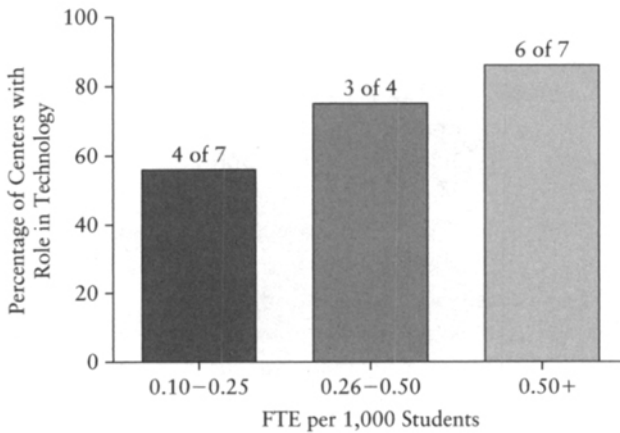
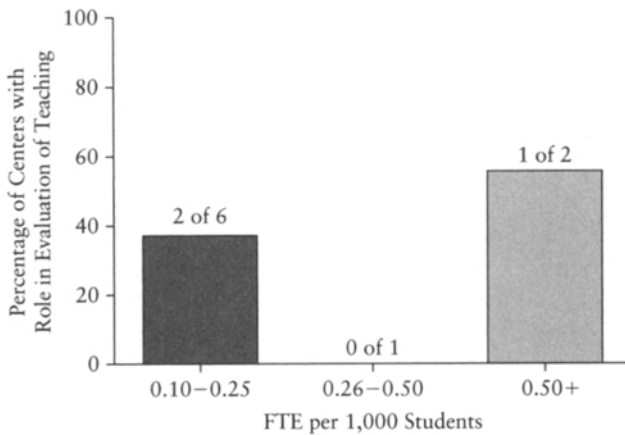
**Figure 5.2. Percentage of Centers with Role in Technology Support or Training, by Size of Center**


Figure 5.3 shows the percentage of centers that have responsibility for evaluation of teaching, as a function of the size of the center, again measured by a staff-per-student ratio. This graph shows that there is no simple relation between size of the center and its responsibility for student evaluations. This is different from the relationship for technology, suggesting that centers may have assumed this responsibility if it was part of their mission, defined by either a center's own staff, or by the university administration.

**Figure 5.3. Percentage of Centers with Formal Role in Evaluation of Teaching, by Size of Center**



## Discussion

We conducted this comparative review of teaching centers at peer institutions as a response to a question asked by our faculty advisory board. We have made both our methods and our findings public as a result of discussions with colleagues who suggested such an example might be useful for other centers choosing to undertake a similar inquiry. Though there were several limitations to the work, the original purpose of the process revolved around answering a question about several peer institutions—a situation many centers are likely to encounter at some point.

The process of creating this report gave us an opportunity to learn about other centers and reflect on our own practice in a way that we continue to find valuable. A pleasant by-product of the initial report was identification of interesting, novel, and successful programs undertaken by the various centers. We prepared an addendum to the original report containing highlights from the various programs we reviewed and shared those program highlights with our advisory board. In addition, we also took the opportunity to identify website features at various centers that we found helpful while browsing for information. See the Appendix to this chapter for additional information about program highlights and website features, with links to specific center sites so you can explore them for information as well. The work of several centers not represented in the comparative report was part of our initial thirty-five target centers, and it also appears in the program highlights.

We learned several things throughout this process that we want to pass on to centers considering a similar project. First, decide what you want to know before you start gathering information. The amount of material on most center websites can be overwhelming, and knowing what you are looking for helps streamline the search process. Second, identify for comparison only institutions that have characteristics similar to yours and programs you find compatible and in line with what you want your center to accomplish. Our center's specific needs within the self-study drove our selection of both desired information and comparison centers.

Third, do your homework before contacting the other centers. We wanted to minimize inconvenience to the other centers by gathering in advance as much information as possible. Our goal was to find every bit of public information possible, so all our colleagues had to do was fill in the blanks. Several center directors expressed appreciation for our consideration of their time in doing so, and we also found that being familiar with each center through browsing its website facilitated much more efficient and enjoyable conversation when we talked directly with center staff members. Fourth, recognize the inherent limitations in an inquiry like ours. Any small sample will not likely represent all teaching centers. The centers responding to our inquiry were only those we could contact and successfully interview in a short period of time, roughly six weeks, and the sample does not include centers from small liberal arts colleges or community colleges. Furthermore, the data represent only a single point in time. Several centers reported that their programs, budgets, or staffing had just changed or was likely to change in the near future, thus making these summary data reflective of the state of affairs at each center only at the time of the interview (spring 2008).

A more overarching consideration, and one that should drive all of your activities in conducting a review such as ours, involves the purpose for which you are conducting your review. Are you doing so to get ideas about programs or center structure? Are you attempting to leverage resources for desired programs or structural changes? Are you trying to situate yourself in the context of other, similar centers so you can identify realistic expectations for what your center can accomplish? By clearly defining your purpose in advance, you can approach the review and set realistic expectations for what information you need and the form it should take.

An additional type of information we wish we would have formally gathered was more qualitative data. Questions such as "What are the three things you are most proud of accomplishing in the last three years?" or "What are two or three things you hope to achieve in the next three years?" would have allowed us to get a better feel for the direction of the

various centers, and it could have been another source of ideas for developing our own center. These topics sometimes came up in the course of follow-up conversation, but systematically prompting them would have been valuable.

Comparative information similar to that contained in this chapter has been willingly shared among centers in the past, and it appears in annual reports to administrators and in conversation with colleagues and advisory boards. After completing our survey, we learned of similar regional projects undertaken by universities connected by an athletic conference (Big Ten, SEC). The data do not appear to have been published, but this suggests the value of such information. Summary data of this form could be a resource for the entire teaching center community. We hope that, by sharing our data and our methods with the community, we will inspire similar work and its distribution through publication by others. In that way we can all better document what it is we do, and analyze how our work relates to what other centers are doing. It is also conceivable that a collaborative effort with the POD Network could begin the accumulation of a public database of information about some of these features of center functions and resources. If each center contributed its own information, other centers could sort the data by various institutional characteristics and get a comparison set of data quite readily. Such a database could also address the two limitations mentioned earlier, by allowing larger samples to be explored in more detail more quickly. Also, if contributing centers updated the database regularly (say, once a year), then the comparative information gathered would be more likely to reflect current circumstances. The first steps in this effort would involve a thorough and thoughtful consideration of what characteristics of centers and our work should be included and how they could be best represented. The present case is one example only, though it could be a useful starting point for that larger conversation.

## **Appendix: Selected Program Highlights and Website Features**

### **Program Highlights**

#### *Teaching as Intellectual Work*

Teaching Portfolio Gallery (University of Kansas)

[www.cte.ku.edu/gallery/](http://www.cte.ku.edu/gallery/)

- Visible examples of the intellectual work of college teaching
- Tangible product that can be referenced for tenure reviews and job interviews

**Peer Review of Teaching (Kansas State University)**

[www.k-state.edu/catl/peerreview/](http://www.k-state.edu/catl/peerreview/)

- Two-semester program that results in a course portfolio
- Faculty members paired with peer mentors who have already created a course portfolio

**Department Level Development Grant (Iowa State University)**

[www.celt.iastate.edu/grants\\_awards/TEACHProposal2008.html](http://www.celt.iastate.edu/grants_awards/TEACHProposal2008.html)

- One-time grant to support improvement of teaching for an entire department
- Must go toward faculty development, not for technology

**Faculty Learning Communities (University of Georgia and University of Minnesota)**

[www.ctl.uga.edu/resources/resources.htm#flc](http://www.ctl.uga.edu/resources/resources.htm#flc)

[www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/faculty/mid/index.html](http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/faculty/mid/index.html)

- Foster dialogue among faculty
- Targeted toward specific audiences (e.g., midcareer faculty, pretenure faculty)

***Workshops, Outreach, Teaching Resources*****Workshops on Demand (University of Arizona)**

[nfc.arizona.edu/UTC/workshoprequest.html](http://nfc.arizona.edu/UTC/workshoprequest.html)

- Workshops offered only when requested
- Online request form allows interested parties to request a workshop
- Workshop then planned and notice sent out to potential attendees via precreated email lists of instructors interested in particular topics

**Workshops Open to the Community (Texas Christian University and University of Oregon)**

[www.cte.tcu.edu/workshopsevents.html](http://www.cte.tcu.edu/workshopsevents.html)

<http://tep.uoregon.edu/workshops/index.html>

- Open to audiences outside the hosting university
- Includes high school teachers, faculty at local community colleges, and businesses

**Thank a Teacher (University of Iowa)**

<http://centeach.uiowa.edu/thanks/index.shtml>

- Online form students can complete to tell a professor or GTA something they enjoyed or appreciated
- Comments delivered following end of semester

**TeachingTalk 2.0/Teaching Blogs (University of Iowa and University of Oregon)**

<http://at-lamp.its.uiowa.edu/cft/teachingtalk/>

<http://tepblog.uoregon.edu/blog/>

- Online blog dedicated to conversation about teaching
- Informal and relaxed, with a range of topics covered

**Podcasts/Teaching Tube (Arizona State University and University of Oregon)**

<http://clte.asu.edu/podcasts/>

<http://clte.asu.edu/teachingtube/>

<http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/facultyshowcase.html>

- Online video and multimedia presentations about teaching
- Prepared and presented by faculty

*Distance Learning, Technology of Teaching***Hybrid Courses (University of Oklahoma)**

<http://pii.ou.edu/content/view/58/56/>

- Replace some portion of classroom time with online experiences
- Variety of educational tasks can supplement lectures and seat work

**Funding for Online Course Development (Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis)**

[ctl.iupui.edu/Programs/jumpstart.asp](http://ctl.iupui.edu/Programs/jumpstart.asp)

- Grant program to design and implement an online or hybrid course
- Support also offered in technical aspects of design such as programming, video support, graphic design, and so on

**Online Certificate in College Teaching (University of New Hampshire)**  
[www.unh.edu/teaching-excellence/Academic\\_prog\\_in\\_coll\\_teach/index.html](http://www.unh.edu/teaching-excellence/Academic_prog_in_coll_teach/index.html)

- Open to students from around the United States
- Faculty who teach courses also from several universities

### *GTA Services*

Graduate Teaching Consultants (University of Michigan)

[www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/gtc.php](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/gtc.php)

- Experienced GTAs act as consultants for their peers
- Confidential and outside the departments

TA Mentors (University of Georgia)

[www.crlt.uga.edu/teach\\_asst/ta\\_mentors/ta\\_mentors\\_long\\_description.htm](http://www.crlt.uga.edu/teach_asst/ta_mentors/ta_mentors_long_description.htm)

- Mentors are experienced GTAs selected to participate in Future Faculty Program
- One aspect of program is to take leadership role in discussion of teaching within their department, including leading seminars, mentoring peers, and documenting their intellectual work

College Teaching Certificate Programs (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Ohio State University, and Texas Tech University)

[www.cte.uiuc.edu/Did/Faculty/index.htm](http://www.cte.uiuc.edu/Did/Faculty/index.htm)

<http://ftad.osu.edu/gis/>

[www.tlrc.ttu.edu/teach/about.asp](http://www.tlrc.ttu.edu/teach/about.asp)

- Allow graduate students to document their teaching ability
- Requirements have various forms but usually involve a series of recommended courses and teaching experiences

### **Website Features**

Navigation bars clearly located on the page (Kennesaw State University)

[www.kennesaw.edu/cet/](http://www.kennesaw.edu/cet/)

- Stay in place regardless of which page in the site the visitor is on
- Quick visual reference to various areas of the site

Site-specific search engine (University of Kansas)

[www.cte.ku.edu/](http://www.cte.ku.edu/)

- Allows visitor to look for keywords only on the center's site
- Quickly locate information of interest (for example, grant programs)



**Site map link (Penn State University)**

[www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/sitemap/](http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/sitemap/)

- Single page with index of all site areas visible as a series of organized links
- Allows quick identification of scope of site and also easy locating of information within it

**Audience-specific navigation bars (University of Michigan)**

[www.crlt.umich.edu/](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/)

- Allows quick identification of relevant services