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Collegial and Departmental Support Matters: An Exploration of Teaching Cultures and Practice

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Abstract

Even though many colleges and universities are increasingly supporting teaching and learning centers, SoTL, faculty learning communities, and other evidence-based teaching practices, uncertainty still remains regarding the impact of these practices and programs on quality student learning. Often colleges and universities simply give “lip service to the idea” of good teaching, and yet lack organizational commitments and structures to truly support teaching. Using a large-scale, multi-institutional study of teaching cultures, this study explores faculty perceptions of commitment to quality teaching and faculty perceptions of departmental and institutional support for teaching. The results carry implications for departmental and institutional initiatives in support of teaching and the improvement of pedagogical practice towards equitable college student learning.

Collegial and Departmental Support Matters: An Exploration of Teaching Cultures and Practice

In 1999, Baker declared that faculty tend to work in isolation, "often disconnected from administrators, colleagues and many of their students" (Baker, 1999). This seclusion was not just the case for scholarly research, but in particular, manifested through a "pedagogical isolation" in teaching (Shulman, 1993). Decades later, this claim remains, with faculty across disciplines complaining of a lack of community and collegiality in teaching (Palmer and Zajonc, 2010; Huber et al., 2005). This is perhaps not surprising. Most faculty are not trained as teachers, but rather scholars, and at doctoral institutions, tend to be more highly valued for their scholarship rather than teaching ability (Hardré et al., 2011). Further, Roxå and Mårtensson found that in large group conversations about teaching, such as teaching workshops, faculty tend to stay quiet, choosing rather to keep their conversations about teaching limited to small, trusted groups. Thus, even within efforts to create faculty communities of teachers, faculty may remain disciplinarily siloed and socially isolated, merely superficially involved in conversations of teaching, and/or resistant to change.

In this climate, to support faculty as teacher-scholars often requires cross-campus support, structural commitment, and, as Banta (2007) describes, "extensive faculty development." Recent research suggests that universities and colleges are increasingly attempting to support faculty development and teaching (Willett, 2013). One lever of support comes through the creation and expansion of Teaching and Learning Centers on campuses. Teaching and Learning Centers work to create a community of learners on teaching, and may provide data on how improving teaching can improve learning. However, the size and funding of a college or university may affect the staffing and resources of the learning center (Grupp, 2014).

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Another avenue to combat isolation and increase quality teaching is through Faculty Learning Communities (FLC). Smith et. al. (2008) suggests FLCs are effective for enhancing learning and teaching, providing professional development, encouraging reflection of the teaching practice, and giving space for collaboration and support. In particular, FLCs can offer a feeling of departmental support to quality teaching (Addis et. al, 2013). Smith et. al (2008) also found that FLCs can enhance faculty interest in teaching, however, a lack of faculty incentive in improving their teaching remains.

The field of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), or scholarly approaches to teaching and learning disseminated in a peer-reviewed community, can inform how faculty think about and understand their teaching. Miller-Young, Yeo, and Manarin (2018) find that many faculty express discomfort when starting in SoTL, often because to think about teaching suggests questioning traditional practices and challenging some epistemological beliefs about a transmission model of teaching. In particular, faculty may equate diving into SoTL with giving up their “expert-ness” and disrupting their identity as scholars. This may be particularly resonant in certain disciplines, where faculty are particularly discouraged from spending time on teaching rather than research (Sirum, Madigan, & Klionsky, 2009).

Transformative change of faculty support for teaching creates pathways to equitable college student learning, development, and success. There is a connection between teachers’ understandings of teaching and learning, and quality learning by students (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009, Martin et. al, 2000; Freeman et. al, 2014; Gibbs and Coffey, 2004; Trigwell, Prosser, and Waterhouse, 1999). Willett (2013) argues that a community space to discuss teaching can create increased cross-campus collegiality, collaboration, and a sense of belonging amongst faculty and staff, which can result in improved student learning. A community of learners can allow faculty a

space to try new things, get feedback, foster collaboration, and feel empowered in the classroom (Sirum, Madigan, & Kliensky, 2009).

Purpose and Research Questions

Even though many colleges and universities are increasingly supporting teaching and learning centers, SoTL, faculty learning communities, and other evidence-based teaching practices, uncertainty still remains regarding the impact of these practices and programs on quality student learning. For example, Reder (2007) argues that often colleges and universities simply give “lip service to the idea” of good teaching, and yet lack structures to truly support teaching. Frost & Teodorescu (2011) suggest that both cultural environments and organizational structures are crucial elements of support for strong teaching in colleges and universities.

Furthermore, Hardré et al. (2011) argue that faculty members “need to see their departments and institutions as supportive of their efforts and development” of “skills and tools” to bolster self-efficacy and productivity (p. 60). It follows that departmental and institutional support for quality teaching enhances instructional practice. In alignment with previous research, this study seeks to further explore how faculty perceptions of departmental, collegial, and institutional support for teaching vary across selected characteristics and relate to effective pedagogical practice. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do faculty demographics and characteristics vary by levels of support for teaching?
2. How do institutional characteristics vary by levels of support for teaching?
3. How do teaching practices vary by levels of support for teaching?

Methods

Data

The data for this study comes from the 2019 administration of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE). The purpose of FSSE is to measure faculty and instructor perceptions of and involvement in undergraduate student engagement at four-year colleges and universities. Every year FSSE appends extra item sets to the end of participating institution's administrations to further explore topics of interest to the field of higher education. The focus of this study was on an extra item set about faculty perceptions of their teaching environment with an emphasis placed on departmental, collegial, and institutional support for teaching (see this paper's measures section and Table 5 for more details). Twenty-two institutions, resulting in 2,392 faculty respondents, received this set.

Respondents

Respondents in this study are limited to those faculty who responded to at least one item within the list of extra items presented in Table 5. Find details about selected faculty respondents' demographics and characteristics within this study in Table 1.

Measures

Key variables of interest in this study are faculty perceptions of levels of support for teaching. For this study, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on the select items of the 2019 FSSE Teaching Environment extra item set (Table 5). The results of this analysis led to the construction of four scales: *Departmental Commitment to Teaching*, *External Commitment to Teaching*, *Departmental Support for Teaching*, and *Collegial Support for Teaching*. To create these scales, the individual responses for each item set were recoded into a 0 to 60 scale: "Very committed" = 4 is recoded to 60, "Quite committed" = 3 is recoded to 40, "Somewhat

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committed” = 2 is recoded to 20, and “Not at all committed” = 1 is recoded to 0. Individual faculty responses on these 0-60 items are then averaged together to create an aggregate scale score. Each of the four scales had high Cronbach’s α ’s and low intraclass correlations (ICC) coefficients suggesting that the items within each scale are highly correlated into narrow constructs with relatively low levels of variation present at the institutional level (see Table 3 for scale descriptives).

Following the scale creation, a two-step cluster analysis of the four scales was conducted. The results of this analysis led to the selection of a three-cluster solution representing a high level of support for teaching, a moderate level of support for teaching, and a low level of support for teaching. A silhouette measure of cohesion and separation (a measure of cluster quality) of .45 indicates a fair cluster solution (Rousseeuw, 1987). Additional variables of interest are the FSSE Scales of good educational practice (listed in Table 4). These scales were created and rigorously tested for use as measures of effective pedagogical practice (FSSE, 2016; BrckaLorenz, Chiang, & Nelson Laird, 2014).

Analyses

To answer the first two research questions on how faculty and institutional characteristics vary by levels of support for teaching, a series of chi-square analyses and standardized residuals were computed. Standardized residuals greater than 2 or less than -2 were considered notable differences (Agresti & Finley, 2009). Faculty and institutional characteristics included those in Tables 1 and 2.

To answer the final research question, a series of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models were examined. In each of these models one of the eleven FSSE Scale measures served as the dependent variable. The independent variable of interest was the three-

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cluster solution representing a high level of support for teaching, a moderate level of support for teaching, and a low level of support for teaching. Coefficients were interpreted in reference to those respondents clustered within the moderate level of support for teaching group, while controlling for faculty and institutional characteristics (see Table 4).

Selected Results

1. How do faculty demographics and characteristics vary by levels of support for teaching?

Faculty that hold the academic rank of assistant professor are underrepresented in those that receive a high level of support for teaching ($AR = -3.4, p < .01$) and overrepresented as those that receive a low level of support for teaching ($AR = 4.4, p < .01$). We did not find differences of strong statistical significance in levels of support for teaching by disciplinary area, tenure status, gender identity, racial/ethnic identification, and sexual orientation.

2. How do institutional characteristics vary by levels of support for teaching?

Faculty employed within a doctoral granting university of high research activity are underrepresented amongst those that receive high levels of support for teaching ($AR = -2.8, p < .01$) and overrepresented amongst those that receive low levels of support for teaching ($AR = 2.6, p < .01$). Faculty within Master's-granting colleges and universities with larger programs are overrepresented amongst those that receive a high level of support for teaching ($AR = 3.6, p < .01$) and underrepresented amongst those that receive a low level of support for teaching ($AR = -3.9, p < .01$). Faculty within Master's colleges and universities with medium programs are underrepresented amongst those that receive a moderate level of support for teaching ($AR = -2.5, p < .01$). We did not find differences in levels of support for teaching by the remaining Carnegie

Classification categories, with no faculty respondents recorded from doctoral granting universities of highest research activity or other Carnegie Classifications.

3. How do teaching practices vary by levels of support for teaching?

Controlling for a variety of faculty demographics and characteristics and institution characteristics, a distinct pattern emerged in how teaching practices vary by levels of support for teaching. Across all FSSE scales of good educational practice, those faculty members receiving a high level of support for teaching were more likely to use effective pedagogical practices within their instructional approach (see Table 4). Additionally, faculty receiving a low level of support for teaching were least likely to utilize effective teaching practices ($B = -.183, p < .01$) and promote quality student interactions with faculty, staff, and other students ($B = -.415, p < .001$).

Abbreviated Discussion

If higher education is interested in promoting equitable college student learning and success, we must understand where quality teaching is being supported, and in what kinds of departments and universities. Our study finds that levels of support for teaching only slightly vary across academic rank and otherwise show no differences across other faculty demographics and characteristics. Most notably, no perceived differences in levels of support for teaching were found amongst disciplinary areas, which might have been expected. This might suggest that individual faculty characteristics and disciplinary norms are less prominent in faculty perceptions of collegial or departmental commitment to quality teaching. Perhaps the results of differences by institution type speak to the cultural norms and missions of institutions themselves as a driving force for faculty perceptions of environment. Most notable, however, are the positive relationships that the commitment and support of colleagues and departments have on faculty use of effective educational teaching practices. This finding alone strengthens the argument for doing

further research on how institutions can form and maintain more positive and supportive cultures for teaching.

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Table 1. Select Respondent Faculty Demographics and Characteristics

	Total Respondent %
<i>Disciplinary Area</i>	
Arts & Humanities	19.8
Biological Sciences, Agriculture, & Natural Resources	6.5
Physical Sciences, Math, & Computer Sciences	11.4
Social Sciences	12.4
Business	10.5
Communication, Media, & Public Relations	3.3
Education	10.5
Engineering	3.3
Health Professions	11.1
Social Service Professions	3.9
Other disciplines	7.3
<i>Academic Rank</i>	
Professor	23.1
Associate Professor	23.1
Assistant Professor	20.5
Instructor	14.5
Lecturer	6.4
Graduate Teaching Assistant	1.2
Other	11.3
<i>Tenure Status</i>	
No tenure system at this institution	10.3
Not on tenure track, but this institution has a tenure system	36.4
On tenure track but not tenured	15.8
Tenured	37.5
<i>Gender Identity</i>	
Man	44.9
Woman	49.1
Another gender identity	0.3
I prefer not to respond	5.7
<i>Racial/Ethnic Identification</i>	
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.4
Asian	5.5
Black or African American	6.8
Hispanic or Latino	2.9
Middle Eastern or North African	0.6
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.1
White	70.5
Another Race or ethnicity	1.1
Multiracial	10.0
I prefer not to respond	11.5
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	
Straight (heterosexual)	82.4
Bisexual	1.6
Gay	2.0
Lesbian	1.0
Queer	0.8
Questioning or unsure	0.1
Another sexual orientation	0.5
I prefer not to respond	11.5

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Table 2. Select Respondent Institutional Characteristics

	Total Respondent %
<i>2018 Basic Carnegie Classification</i>	
Doctoral Universities – Very High Research Activity	0.0
Doctoral Universities – High Research Activity	38.6
Doctoral/Professional Universities	15.5
Master’s Colleges and Universities – Larger Programs	34.0
Master’s Colleges and Universities – Medium Programs	2.8
Master’s Colleges and Universities – Smaller Programs	2.6
Baccalaureate Colleges – Arts and Sciences	2.6
Baccalaureate Colleges – Diverse Fields	3.9
Other Carnegie Classification	0.0

Table 3. Select Items Teaching Environment Scale Descriptives

Scale	Count	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.	Cronb. α	ICC
Departmental Commitment to Teaching (<i>Item #2: a - c</i>)	2337	0	60	48.66	12.57	.810	.021
External Commitment to Teaching (<i>Item #2: d - g</i>)	2252	0	60	41.20	14.01	.881	.026
Departmental Support for Teaching (<i>Item #3: a - e</i>)	2305	0	60	44.35	13.26	.917	.034
Collegial Support for Teaching (<i>Item #3: f - j</i>)	2284	0	60	43.13	13.01	.911	.020

Table 4. Levels of support for teaching predictors for the FSSE Scales of good educational practice

	Low Teaching Support	High Teaching Support
Higher-Order Learning	-.107	.222***
Reflective & Integrative Learning	-.046	.238***
Learning Strategies	-.062	.258***
Quantitative Reasoning	-.084	.120*
Collaborative Learning	-.008	.226***
Discussions with Diverse Others	-.065	.297***
Student-Faculty Interaction	.005	.194**
Effective Teaching Practices	-.183**	.223***
Quality of Interactions	-.415***	.535***
Supportive Environment	-.097	.184***
Course Goals	-.084	.312***

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. The dependent variables were standardized before entry into the model. Coefficients were interpreted compared to those faculty clustered into the group of receiving a moderate level of support for teaching. Faculty control variables included disciplinary area, academic rank, tenure status, gender identity, racial/ethnic identification, and sexual orientation. Institution control variables included the 2018 Basic Carnegie classification.

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Table 5. Select Items in the FSSE 2019 Teaching Environment Item Set

2. How committed to quality teaching are the following people at your institution?

Response options: Very committed, Quite committed, Somewhat committed, Not at all committed

- a. Department colleagues
- b. Department chair
- c. Department staff members
- d. Upper-level administrators (deans, provost, vice presidents, president)
- e. Other administrators
- f. Faculty colleagues from other departments
- g. Student affairs professionals

3. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your department and colleagues?

Response options: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

- a. My department supports me to do my best teaching
 - b. My department publicly recognizes quality teaching
 - c. My department encourages a diversity of perspectives on effective teaching
 - d. My department supports experimentation with new ways of teaching
 - e. My department encourages efforts to improve teaching
 - f. My colleagues talk about teaching improvement
 - g. My colleagues use data to improve student learning
 - h. My colleagues are committed to activities and programs that support innovative teaching
 - i. My colleagues value my teaching
 - j. My colleagues are willing to help with my teaching
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