

BUFFALO STATE COLLEGE
Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL)
Summary of 2003 Fellowship in Collaborative Learning

Submitted by:
Scott L. Johnson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Criminal Justice Department
Program Coordinator, African and African American Studies
Fellow, Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Project Title:

Our Learning Community: Improving Learning Communities at BSC

Brief Description of Project:

Learning communities at Buffalo State College have been very successful. However, I believed that the Buffalo State College learning communities program could further improve its performance by training the faculty. Originally, this fellowship intended to create a learning community for Buffalo State College faculty to provide this faculty development. The creation of a faculty learning community did not occur for several reasons. The faculty learning community was envisioned as a yearlong project with monthly meetings. This was not possible because many faculty were uncertain as to whether they would participate in learning communities in Fall 2003. Planning the faculty learning community was also difficult because activities such as site visits, guest speakers, reading materials required resources that were not readily available following the campus fiscal crisis of Fall 2002. Third, the heart of the fellowship involved a research study, not program development. As such, the study in this fellowship would have to be completed for use in the faculty learning community. Completing the research and the faculty learning community in a single academic year was not realistic. Lastly, the study was originally envisioned as a comparison of learning communities and freshman seminars intended to demonstrate increased student learning and faculty satisfaction due to the collaborative nature of learning communities. However, a review of research on the first year experience as well as the recommendations of Middle States Accreditation process implied that such a comparison was unfair and unwarranted. Freshman seminars have a different goal and primary student constituency than learning communities. More importantly, the goal of the fellowship was not to demonstrate learning communities' superiority to freshman seminars. The goal was to demonstrate the pedagogical validity and appeal of collaboration for faculty as well as provide strategies to maximize the potential success of teaching collaborations in the future.

The study for this fellowship sought to discover the best practices of faculty teaching in programs for first year students. Of particular interest was why and how faculty modified their pedagogy and/or expectations. The belief is that student experiences in first year programs and program performance overall would improve if the collective wisdom of the experienced faculty could be organized and disseminated to new participants.

I acquired the names of the faculty who taught in learning communities, learning teams and freshman seminars with the assistance of Dr. Kerran Sanger, Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies and Josephine Adamo in Academic Support Services. Twenty-one interviews were completed. I was unable to schedule interviews with a significant number of faculty despite their willingness to participate. So, data collection is ongoing to further the study. I expect to complete this process during early fall 2003 for publication and presentation sometime in 2004.

Using a preliminary analysis of existing data, Timothy Ecklund, Associate Vice President for Residence Life and Auxiliary Services, Dr. Sanger, and I held a training session for faculty who would be participating in learning communities in Fall 2003 on May 15. The session covered the outcomes of the CASTL Fellowship research, Student Development Theories, and Strategies for Successful Collaborative Teaching, and Maximizing Integrated Hours. Approximately twenty people attended the session. While we were unable to distribute a formal evaluation, comments were extremely positive. Participants said they learned from the experience and expertise of other faculty and found the information very useful in planning for the fall learning communities.

Summary and Major Recommendations:

The preliminary analysis of this research has many implications for campus. First, faculty expectations of these first year experiences and the realities of these experiences often do not match. Faculty participation in freshman seminars is often not motivated by individual faculty interest in first year students. Department chairpersons solicited the majority of participants. Those faculty who volunteered were attracted to the idea of smaller classes and the opportunity to use different pedagogical approaches. Participants in learning communities designed academic experiences that were very intellectually challenging. The excitement of these professors was soon tempered by the realities of teaching first year students with underdeveloped academic skills, a lack of intellectual curiosity, and little life experience. Thus, the intellectual experience expected by the faculty was less than anticipated. Also detracting from the enjoyment of the intellectual experience was the necessity of addressing first year student issues, as opposed to disciplinary course content only. This implies that recruitment of faculty who participate in these programs must include some understanding of the realities of teaching first year students.

Classroom practice of the faculty may undermine the overall success of first year programs in that many respondents reported that they did not make first year student

issues a teaching priority. Yet, these issues comprise the heart of the goal of the programs. Professors do discuss issues such as time management, campus resources, etc. However, respondents state that they do so when necessitated by circumstance. The discussions are not heavily researched or prepared by the faculty. Discussions of first year issues are rarely, if ever, lesson planned. Thus, the retention, persistence, and academic goals of these programs may not be maximized because of this.

The experience of the faculty is that the programs accomplish their goals. Faculty also assert that regardless of the number of students affected by the program, the programs are worthwhile. It is difficult to demonstrate that the programs have substantive impact on student learning and subsequent student academic performance at aggregate levels. An overwhelming majority of respondents expressed the hope that macrolevel statistical performance indicators would not be the sole determinants of the success of these programs. Much of the success of these programs is understood experientially, not manifested empirically.

The collaborative experience of faculty participants in the learning communities has been extremely positive. Even those faculty who did not have very positive experiences have positive feelings toward collaboration. However, training on how to collaborate more successfully would be most welcome.

Lastly, faculty development programs should be held regularly as part of an ongoing program to improve teaching and learning at Buffalo State College. Forums to disseminate the outcomes of the work of these fellowships and other scholarship of teaching and learning for Buffalo State College faculty must be routine occurrences.