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Re: Re-envisioning and Enhancing the FCLD to Support Teaching Excellence at the University of Hartford

Date: October 15, 2015

As a consultant to the University of Hartford, I respectfully submit the attached report of my activities on September 9th and 10th, 2015. I appreciated everyone’s thoughtfulness and graciousness during my visit and enjoyed meeting so many of the University’s faculty and academic administrators. On a more personal note, I was impressed with the commitment of the University’s teachers and the rich conversations about the role of a teaching and learning center in enhancing faculty growth and development as instructors and scholars.

I hope this report provides you and your working group with information on strengths, challenges, and recommendations for a faculty teaching and learning center. I would like to offer the Goal 3 Implementation teams follow-up conference calls or additional email correspondence if they have further questions or need additional information. Please do not hesitate to contact me:
msorcine@mtholyoke.edu or msorcinelli@acad.umass.edu and at 413.538.3436.

With much appreciation to you, the faculty, and the academic leaders at University of Hartford for such an engaging exchange on the topics of teaching, learning and faculty development.
Re-envisioning and Enhancing the FCLD to Support Teaching Excellence at University of Hartford

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The Strategic Plan Goal 3 Implementation Team and the Office of the Provost, University of Hartford, initiated a needs assessment with the goal of tapping into faculty perspectives on how the campus might re-envision and enhance the current Faculty Center for Learning Development (FCLD) to support teaching excellence at the University. The review, which occurred September 9-10, 2015, is particularly useful to the University, now in the midst of strategic planning, 2014-2019. The review also will provide the Goal 3 Implementation Team with assistance in its own assessments and goal-setting.

In conducting the assessment, I brought my own expertise and experiences to the University. I have founded two teaching and faculty development centers, hold a faculty appointment, and am well connected nationally and internationally as an experienced faculty development professional. I research and write about teaching, learning and faculty development and have a strong commitment to the value of a teaching center in a university community. Accordingly several questions guided my review:

- What should be the purpose and key goals of an enhanced teaching and learning center?
- What are the University’s biggest assets in developing such a center? What are the biggest challenges to making things work?
- How might a Center be of assistance to instructors (and their departments) in enhancing teaching and student learning?
Description of Consultation Activities

As an external consultant, I used two primary sources of information. Before visiting the University, I had a conference call with the Goal 3 Implementation Team and the Provost, reviewed documents such as the University’s Strategic Framework 2014-2019, the campus website, the Faculty Center for Learning and Development (FCLD) offerings, and information on teaching grants and awards. Once I arrived, I spent an evening and full day conducting interviews and focus groups to learn about the various components of instructional supports and the perceptions of an extensive array of the University’s faculty and administrators concerning current strengths, areas for improvement, and future directions.

Interviews and focus groups occurred with a wide ranging constituency, including faculty at every career stage, instructors in different disciplines, and administrators in various institutional roles. I met with three focus groups of early-career, mid-career, and senior faculty members, and with two groups of faculty from across all ranks. I met with the FCLD staff. I also interviewed senior campus administrators, including the Provost. I had an evening meal and morning meeting with the chair and members of Goal 3 Working Sub-Groups, a luncheon with the Strategic Planning Team and the committee charged with establishing a teaching and learning center. Over the course of my visit, I met with approximately 52 University of Hartford faculty members, professional staff, and academic leaders in some 9 individual meetings or focus groups.

In general, I used these opportunities to be with diverse communities to confirm observations and impressions. When I heard similar accounts of activities, impressions, and reactions from more than one source, I gave more credence to the information. I have the most confidence in accounts that recurred in multiple contexts, and my core observations are based on that kind of information. I do want to note that while the site visit interviews provided rich information and were marked by considerable openness and candor, the opinions of those interviewed cannot be said to be representative of every faculty member and administrator. My visit affords perspectives against which other data can be tested for evidence of intensity of feelings of support, relative merit of stated goals, and commitment to furthering teaching development on the campus.
Purpose and Goals for a Teaching and Learning Center

In considering the overall purpose of an enhanced teaching and learning center, respondents advocated for a unit that would sustain and further promote a University culture that values and rewards teaching development and innovation, and encourages an environment in which all students can learn and excel.

When asked what should be the primary goals guiding an enhanced center, interviewees identified three primary goals (italicized and in rank order based on number of times mentioned across all focus groups and interviewees):

1. To advance and support new and innovative initiatives in teaching and learning
2. To foster collegiality and community among faculty members both within and across departments, schools and colleges
3. To partner in the teaching and learning enterprise with the FCLD

Interviewees also identified four other important goals:

4. To create a faculty-driven center, responding to individual faculty members’ goals for professional development in teaching
5. To create a learner-centered environment, supporting the University’s diverse learners and possibly engaging them in the center’s work
6. To act as a clearing house for empirically supported, evidence-based teaching methods
7. To provide incentives, recognition and reward for excellence in teaching

During the focus groups, respondents identified key assets of the University for developing a teaching and learning center responsive to the above goals. Strengths of the University of Hartford include:

A Vibrant Teaching Community. Overwhelmingly and throughout the campus interviews, I heard strong affirmations of respect and appreciation for the faculty’s “devotion and commitment to students.” Many interviewees pointed to “an experienced and dedicated faculty who care about teaching and want to excel at it,” "a core of committed and enthusiastic
faculty working to help our students succeed,” “teachers who are desirous to stretch and learn
new pedagogies,” “young faculty who bring new scholarly and teaching ideas to our University,”
and senior faculty who serve as campus mentors in teaching. In particular, interviewees
mentioned the efforts of Warren Goldstein, the Harry Jack Gray Distinguished Teaching
Humanist and Chair, Department of History, the Education Department’s tech-savvy faculty, and
H. Frederick Sweitzer, Associate Provost, Dean of Graduate Studies, and Professor, Department
of Education.

Infrastructure and Facilities that Support Teaching. Many faculty members were highly positive
about the support of the small staff of two in the FCLD. Interviewees described Director, Lorelle
Wilson and Instructional Designer, Bevin Rainwater, as having created a welcoming, responsive,
and supportive climate. Among faculty experimenting with new technologies, there was
consensus that the FCLD was an asset to the University, as is the technological infrastructure for
instruction (e.g., Blackboard course management system, wired classrooms). A number of focus
groups strongly encouraged the integration of the FCLD into an enhanced teaching and learning
center.

Leadership. Interviewees identified the academic leadership of the University as one that
“desires to continuously improve.” Focus groups noted as significant the “general commitment
of the University to good teaching,” the explicit inclusion of teaching innovation in the strategic
plan, the press for an innovative curriculum, and the leadership’s willingness to explore to topic
of faculty development by listening to the faculty.

Positive Teaching Development Experiences. A number of interviewees also cited on-campus
teaching development opportunities as particularly substantive and career-enhancing. These
included writing-across-the-curriculum workshops through the Teaching Humanist initiatives,
Educational Technology Grants, Engaged Learning Fellowships, International Center Faculty
Grants, Workshops on Engaged Learning, and the Flipping Grant. Interestingly, faculty were less
familiar with the array of faculty awards for teaching and mentioned that they knew colleagues
who had won awards but there were no forums for awardees to share their expertise.
Challenges to Creating a Teaching and Learning Center

Despite the commendable teaching development assets of the University of Hartford, I heard a number of comments about the challenges and barriers to making a Center successful in its support of faculty. They include, in order of number of times identified by interviewees:

Funding. For a number of interviewees, the economics of the University caused concerns about whether the center would be adequately supported, especially in terms of staffing (many noted that FCLD already is minimally staffed), technology resources, and funds for grants and other incentives for engaging in teaching development initiatives.

Competition for Faculty Time. Interviewees in every focus group raised the issue of faculty “busyness” and noted that teaching development activities will be competing with many other demands on faculty time (e.g., teaching load, engagement in service, changing expectations for faculty performance as teachers and scholars). There was concern that all of these factors would impact scheduling and attending teaching workshops and programs. Interviewees noted that this would be particularly true for adjunct faculty, who typically taught classes during the evenings -- when a teaching center would be closed. Faculty also reported a lack of time to develop teaching innovations, especially demanding activities such as training for integrating technology into the classroom or “flipping” a classroom. One respondent noted, “It takes a lot of work to transform one’s teaching.”

Limited Space. Too often, centers for teaching and learning are perceived as helpful but distant, not well known, hard to find, and on the periphery of campus. Interviewees mentioned that space is tight and they were concerned that the center would not be allocated enough space to develop a presence and identity on campus.

Mechanisms for Building Community. Faculty members expressed the desire to work with colleagues within and outside of their disciplines but there was a general perception that schools and colleges were “silos,” and that there were few formal mechanisms for faculty to get to know each other and share ideas about and experiences in teaching. Faculty also described varying support among their departments, schools and colleges for encouraging and rewarding faculty for leading or participating in teaching enhancement initiatives (e.g., promotion, tenure).
Interviewees were asked what areas they were most interested in learning, and would be most likely to access a teaching and learning center. The three primary areas of interest are italicized below; however, needs and interests were wide ranging and included the following (in order of number of times mentioned by interviewees):

1. *Interactive instructional techniques (especially active learning structures and strategies)*

2. *Instructional technology such as incorporating technology into traditional classroom teaching, creative use of discipline-based, open software, using technology for teaching a blended/flipped course or an online course*

3. *Learning how to teaching writing across the curriculum (examples often provided were learning how to create writing assignments, assess student writing, use peer learning/feedback strategies)*

4. *Skills and support for engaging in high impact practices such as mentoring undergraduate research, sponsoring internships, and integrating community service learning into courses*

5. *Student issues such as understanding generational learning differences, student motivation, how traditional age students learn, how adult students learn*

6. *Learning how to conduct scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and disciplinary-based research on teaching—and having such efforts recognized for tenure and promotion*

7. *Preparation and organization for learning such as course design and curriculum development and expansion for 21st century learners*

Interviewees also identified how they would like to learn. More than anything, they were desirous of inter-collegial support such as becoming a peer mentor, participating in a learning community or fellowship, sharing teaching practices (visiting each other’s classes); learning how to conduct disciplinary-based research on teaching (e.g. SoTL); monthly informal “teacher talk” discussing teaching issues, and opportunities in departmental or college meetings to discuss teaching.
It is with the greatest recognition of my limited time at the University of Hartford that I offer “recommendations.” I was impressed by the enormously effective work already being done by faculty and staff, and by the set of resources that already support development and recognition for excellence in teaching. In that spirit I offer a set of recommendations that might be useful to the University.

Recommendations for the Structure and Staffing of an Enhanced Teaching and Learning Center

1. **Integrate the FCLD into the Teaching and Learning Center.** The staff of the FCLD was well regarded among interviewees and should be part of the enhanced center. At the same time, I believe that the center will be most effective if the guiding principles are pedagogical and if it is led by an individual with faculty status. Interviewees are looking for a structure that can best provide synergy among pedagogical activities on campus, offer continuity in teaching support services, explore teaching issues and approaches by discipline, foster interdisciplinarity by connecting instructors with common interests across disciplines, and, ultimately, play a key role in fostering a campus culture that values and rewards teaching. There are many models for teaching and learning centers, including a number of well-regarded programs in New England (a link to centers can be found through the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education [http://www.podnetwork.org](http://www.podnetwork.org) and the New England Faculty Development Consortium at [http://www.nefdc.org](http://www.nefdc.org)). The strongest centers tend to be faculty-driven and led by pedagogical interests rather than by technology or assessment.

2. **Create a Leadership Plan for the Center.** In larger institutions, the appointment of a full-time director is common. At smaller campuses, the model of a director who comes from the faculty, who is a highly respected teacher and scholar, whose workload is adjusted (teaching one course each semester or one course each year), and rotates after a three year term is more customary. Given the interviewees’ strong perception of a community of vibrant, innovative teachers on campus, and a number of award-winning teachers to call upon, I recommend an internal search for a faculty director (or provost...
appointment with faculty consultation). The faculty member might be offered a three year appointment, and renewable up to five years subject to review. At that juncture, the campus can review and consider the option of a national search for a full-time director. I also want to note that the director could come from any discipline on campus. My colleagues and I recently conducted a study of the field of faculty development and found that the profession is eclectic, drawing individuals from a wide variety of disciplines. We found that while a substantial percentage of center directors and faculty developers earned their highest degree in the discipline of education, there was solid representation from the social and behavioral sciences, the humanities and fine arts, and the STEM disciplines.

3. **Examine Budget and Staff Resources.** I would encourage the University of Hartford to consider how it might better configure its staffing resources in the enhanced center, especially given that a recurrent theme in the interviews was concern about the shortage of FCLD staff. The current arrangement, particularly in the context of the growing expectations, may not be sustainable in the long run. If not addressed directly by budget adjustments, it could lead to overload for the center’s new director (who also will need at least some part-time administrative support). The new director will also want to map out the existing programs, grants, fellowships, and awards for teaching with an eye toward how to best leverage them to align with the center’s key goals and priorities.

4. **Identify a Physical Space for the Center.** Many interviewees commented on the current FCLD’s cramped physical space. They strongly recommended an attractive physical space for the Center so that it becomes a true “hub” for pedagogical innovation and is welcoming and accessible to all faculty, regardless of rank. Faculty felt it was important that the center develop a central presence and identity on campus so that it could serve as the communication center and repository for information about all University activities related to faculty development. Besides encouraging faculty-to-faculty contact, it could offer space for informal faculty-student contact and meetings related to course work as a means for integrating the academic and social aspects of learning. Some interviewees suggested that in the longer term, the University might consider the
development of a campus “Teaching and Learning Commons.”

Recommendations for the Newly Established Teaching and Learning Center

1. **Strategically Decide on Core Services and Supported Initiatives.** Interviewees offered a fairly exhaustive list of issues and needs, reported in detail in the earlier sections of this report on the key goals and issues the center should address. Since resources are finite, the leadership of the new center, along with an advisory group, should identify consciously and intentionally the core set of activities that it wishes to do thoroughly. There should be a balance between one-time events and ongoing programs such as faculty learning communities. It is worth noting that some individuals questioned the use of outside speakers, noting that they would like to hear more about the ways in which their own colleagues practice teaching and deal with student issues. Strategic decisions on the core programs to offer, specific instructional institutional incentives to support them, and the partnerships that best serves the strategic choices of services and initiatives, should help to maintain focus on a feasible scope of work. One way or another, it seems a good time to identify consciously and intentionally the key priorities for the new center.

2. **Engage Faculty Across Career Stages.** New and early career faculty were interested in continued support for orientation, mentoring, and instructional support. They reported interest in quality mentoring and opportunities to get a good start in teaching through early, confidential, supportive feedback, discussion of teaching and learning strategies, including how to develop a learner-centered syllabus, course goals, teaching strategies, and methods for evaluating student work. The openness of new and early career faculty to orientation and engaged teaching makes them an ideal clientele for a center as it is starting out. At the same time, midcareer and senior faculty were seeking opportunities for renewal and growth in teaching. As noted earlier, one strategy would be to leverage the talents of respected, tenured, award-winning colleagues by asking them to offer workshops, to serve as “mutual mentors” (e.g. inviting mentees for coffee, to observe each other’s class, or collaborate on a SoTL project), and to share expertise (e.g., teaching technologies, assessment of teaching).
3. **Build campus-wide communities through longer-term, interdisciplinary forums.** Another suggestion was to create and sustain longer-term communities or “fellowships” that might stay together over the course of a several-day institute, a semester or an academic year (e.g., current Teaching and Learning Circles). These communities could be cohort-based (e.g., early career faculty) or topic-based (e.g., focus on student learning styles, general education). A central goal of such groups is to reduce the isolation that often characterizes the teaching experience, promote interdisciplinary conversations about teaching, and provide a means of letting colleagues know about useful innovations. It will be important to at least modestly incentivize the time spent in such communities, and the funds will be well spent. Research now suggests that faculty learning communities and intensive institutes are the most successful investments a campus can make to increase the likelihood of sustained changes in teaching and in the use of innovative, evidence based practices. Models for faculty learning communities can be found at [http://www.umass.edu/cft/](http://www.umass.edu/cft/) and [http://www.units.muohio.edu/celt/](http://www.units.muohio.edu/celt/)

4. **Extend Work to the Schools and Colleges.** University of Hartford has a cadre of faculty with expertise in various aspects of teaching and learning. Some interviewees suggested that once the enhanced center is in place, it might pilot the creation of a network of school- and college-level “Teaching Professors” or “Faculty Associates” to the center, thus expanding the human resources and reach of the center. Each dean might appoint such an individual and offer a modest stipend and some limited funding to support local conversations on teaching development that could occur within a school or college but outside of the center. A mechanism for fostering such a pilot could be developed by tapping into a key faculty user or award-winning teacher in a school or college (assistant, associate or full professor), asking him or her to coordinate connectivity (e.g., a lunch conversation on teaching/learning/curricular issues each month or so) and share outcomes with the center director and school or college dean.

5. **Address Learning as Well as Teaching.** University of Hartford faculty are interested in talking more about learning as well as pedagogy—and in engaging students in that conversation, if possible. Suggestions included: a focus on who are University of Hartford students; how do they best learn; what are student expectations of faculty; what are faculty expectations of students (e.g., motivation, faculty-student contact,
study habits); how different teaching approaches can have an impact on student learning; responsibilities and support for academic advising; linkages between student development services and classroom instructors to improve student outcomes; and how to better promote student engagement in their own learning. Faculty also suggested structuring curriculum reviews as an opportunity to talk about and share course syllabi, textbooks, assignments, and optimal teaching strategies. These topics might be of particular interest to faculty and students in the various schools and colleges.

**Suggestions on Organizational/Institutional Issues**

1. **Teaching Development/Faculty Development.** Placement of an array of faculty development programs in one unit can facilitate a cohesive approach to faculty professional development, and this is an emerging program type on some campuses. At the same time, the use of a teaching center’s resources to work on the broad array of issues organized under professional development (e.g., support for grant writing, scholarly writing, career advancement, adjunct faculty training and teaching in graduate education), even if they are at some level connected to teaching, could take attention and resources away from activities that are central to the undergraduate teaching mission of the University of Hartford. At this moment in time, I think the teaching development priorities for the center would be diluted by a broader portfolio. The provost staff and faculty advisory groups would do well to work with the new center on first setting priorities for teaching development. At a later date, broader priorities for faculty development could then merit exploration and attention in terms of priorities, staffing, and placement. An expanded portfolio may become more important as the University strives to enhance its reputation for scholarship. It is of paramount importance, however, that the University, in gaining ground in research, not lose ground in its significant advances in teaching and in reflective practices in the classroom.

2. **Evaluating and Rewarding Faculty Work.** Interviewees wanted their departments, schools and colleges to better recognize and reward scholarly teaching. They reported that these units, and campus administrators, vary in their support for SoTL as a legitimate and recognized form of scholarship for tenure and promotion. The new
center could continue a dialogue with departments, schools, colleges and the University on the value of SoTL at the University of Hartford. This seems especially important given the attention and resources that have been dedicated to this initiative in the past.

Finally there was some discussion about further campus conversation on how to better evaluate teaching. Departments, schools and colleges want to know what constitutes good teaching procedures can help to distinguish extraordinary from mediocre from poor teaching. The enhanced center could help by providing examples from the scholarly literature and other universities on effective practices within the teaching evaluation and rewards arena. As a teaching support unit, however, it will be important to steer clear of being perceived as a player in summative personnel decision-making.

**Concluding Comments**

During my visit faculty and academic leaders at the University of Hartford demonstrated commitment to student learning and the high quality teaching that is needed to engender it. The campus already has number of initiatives to support the development of its faculty as teachers. A crucial step for the future will be to marshal these somewhat dispersed resources into a center that can provide support for faculty and academic units, drawing upon innovative teaching approaches, cutting edge technologies, and a network of services provided by collaborating units. The University will need to ensure effective program leadership and management by designating a well-regarded faculty member who will have the vision, commitment, management skills, and time to create, maintain, and evaluate services.

I greatly appreciated the opportunity to talk with the many faculty and administrators at the University of Hartford who are committed to teaching and academic excellence and are eager to engage in and support faculty development in teaching. I look forward to seeing the next stage of this important faculty development plan.