The role of a teaching and learning center in effecting institutional change

The challenge for teaching and learning centers

Teaching and learning centers at colleges and universities seek to capitalize on a dual identity: symbol and resource. Many times centers are established and championed by higher administration as the embodiment of the University’s commitment to teaching excellence.

But the perception of the actual role of the center in the life of college or university faculty is often far from clear.

At colleges whose main mission is teaching, centers may seem to carry the taint of remediation. Faculty think the only role of the center is to “fix” bad teachers, and they don’t fall into that group. At research universities where teaching counts very little toward tenure and promotion and virtually nothing toward professional recognition, centers may be seen as symbolic entities only, providing no useful resource for faculty.

In actuality, centers often seek to elevate the status and quality of teaching at the institution and shift the focus of that teaching from teacher performance to student learning. This mission, though certainly involving teaching improvement, goes beyond the limited view of remediation. Likewise, centers often aspire to bridge the gulf between teaching and research, generating a more meaningful role for teaching at research universities. Communicating this mission to the campus at large requires vigorous marketing strategies and attention to campus perceptions.

How can centers become productive agents of change given these perceptions and constraints? In this article I’d like to offer three ways to address this issue: work within the institutional culture, interface with institutional imperatives, and tap into scholarly curiosity and community. I’ve provided examples from our work at the Harold W. McGraw, Jr. Center for Teaching and Learning at Princeton University that illustrate these approaches. In this elite community, the Center has raised the visibility of the role of teaching in graduate student professional development and has envisioned new ways to promote teaching as an intellectually invigorating endeavor, one for which the Center can provide real resources.

Building on institutional culture and institutional imperatives

The best advice that professionals often give to staff working in new teaching and learning centers is “know thyself,” that is, be familiar with the campus climate and important academic movements afoot. Building on this knowledge is often critical to positioning one’s center strategically on the University agenda.
Being recognized as a unit that supports the ongoing work of the college/university is a necessary first step before the center can actually begin to take a leadership role in changing the perception or direction of that work. In fact, the dual roles of the center in providing support and leadership may often become seamlessly intertwined. Let me illustrate this point by sharing some of the work we do with graduate student instructors at the University.

Preparation of graduate students

Part of the research university imperative is to prepare graduate students for scholarly work in the discipline and often for an academic career. At many research universities graduate students are responsible for teaching undergraduates in laboratories and discussion sections, two types of teaching arenas that may pose special challenges for which novice teachers may be unprepared. Universities often offer some support to graduate student teachers through a brief orientation at the beginning of their teaching assignment provided by the university’s teaching center if one exists. At Princeton, the McGraw Center was able to argue successfully to the Graduate School that our day and a half orientation for all first time graduate student instructors be required. Beginning in 2003, this requirement represents a university commitment to providing support for these new teachers and broader professional development for graduate students beyond their research work.

Interestingly, academic imperatives, both local and national, came into play to bring this requirement about.

A year earlier our undergraduate student government had conducted a survey of the precept experience (small group discussion sections) at Princeton and found some dissatisfaction with the quality of the teaching. These precepts are often taught by graduate students, though not exclusively so. But this survey did draw attention to the lack of preparation that the University typically provided for these novice instructors.

Additionally, the Graduate School was responsive to national movements to re-envision graduate education that called for greater attention to training graduate students for their role as teachers. Given that the McGraw Center had been in frequent conversation with the Graduate School about the need to support these new instructors and was poised to provide that support, this change became reality.

While one can argue that “frontloading” everything one needs to know about university teaching before one has actually set foot in a classroom is only a marginally effective strategy, it does accomplish at least three important goals. These orientations, whether a half-day or three days long, provide some introduction to basics of classroom management that can ease the stress that many new teachers face. These orientations expose graduate students to the resources and assistance available through their university’s teaching center. Most importantly, however, these brief sessions involve graduate students in talking with one another about teaching issues and beliefs, and provide them with resources that draw from the research on teaching and learning. That is, these orientations can introduce new instructors to what Huber and Hutchings call the “teaching commons” (2005).

We have expanded these opportunities for interested graduate students by capitalizing on a primary area of concern for them—finding an academic position. More and more academic search committees want documentation of a candidate’s teaching ability. At Princeton graduate students teach relatively little and may feel disadvantaged on the job market because of this. We instituted a structured program, a curriculum if you will, for graduate students that provides a way for them to document their professional development as teachers if they choose.

The Teaching Transcript

Our program is called the Teaching Transcript, our name for an idea we adapted from other graduate student teacher certification programs such as the one at Brown University. Our program consists of several different kinds of experiences: attending our orientation to teaching and five other pedagogy workshops, having a class observed and talking with us about it, and ultimately working with one of the staff to develop a teaching philosophy statement and a course syllabus.
The emphasis on teaching as community property (Shulman, 2004) is a theme throughout this work—one that provides both practical support and intellectual leadership in how these novice teachers view their work.

**Cultivating the idea of teaching as inquiry**

Starting with the recognition of institutional culture and capitalizing on current institutional imperatives are necessary prerequisites to a center integrating into the life of the college or university. But to effect change, centers must design programs and initiatives that highlight teaching as intellectual inquiry, not just academic performance. This re-envisioning can help connect teaching more closely to the scholarly enterprise that drives the institutional culture.

We’ve recently begun a program—“the large class initiative”—that seeks to bring faculty into a closer contact with the learning processes of their students. Fortunately, our center provides both teaching enhancement initiatives for instructors and academic skills support for undergraduates. We work with undergraduates on developing habits of mind involved in processes such as reading in a discipline or approaching problem-solving.

Our offer is not one that deals with content of teaching, but rather the process of learning.

Because of this aspect of our work, we often ask faculty in various venues, “What do you see as the biggest learning challenge your students face in your class?” We have approached a sample of faculty teaching large classes and asked them this question as a prelude to working with them on a special project. We offer to design one or more workshops throughout the semester for their students that address an issue they identify as critical to students’ understanding and success in that discipline. Our offer is not one that deals with content of teaching, but rather the process of learning. Asking professors to reflect on the nature of learning in the discipline and the underlying skills or habits of mind necessary for that learning is often a novel experience for them.

How this program may change the institutional culture is yet to be seen. But we know that giving teachers a chance to reframe their teaching in terms of student learning can be empowering, because it engages their scholarly minds in ways that teaching as telling cannot.

In both our work with graduate students and faculty as described, we seek to shift the focus of teaching to learning, both their students’ and their own. As we work with graduate students, we emphasize teaching as a shared process of learning with their students, and we seek to help them develop as scholarly teachers. Querying professors about challenges in student learning sparks their natural intellectual curiosity and offers them the opportunity to join a community of learners in a way they had not envisioned. Such community forms the natural basis for further inquiry.

Recognizing this scholarly process at work in the university can help centers envision ways to reach and change the teachers they serve, based on their own institutional culture and imperatives.

**References**
