Gathering Mid-semester Feedback: Three Variations to Improve Instruction

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Patricia R. Payette and Marie Kendall Brown • University of Louisville

Abstract

A valuable supplement to student evaluations of teaching (SETs) is the mid-semester feedback (MSF) technique, an intervention that can facilitate meaningful improvement of the teaching and learning experience. Scheduling time for an MSF enables a systematic, formative evaluation of instruction on a specific student population in a given semester. The authors introduce and provide an overview of the MSF, unpack the procedure step-by-step, share research on the MSF, and offer guidance for implementing several variations for instructors who find themselves short on resources and time.

Keywords: mid-semester feedback, formative feedback, instructional improvement, classroom assessment, Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID)

For the majority of college instructors, student evaluations of teaching (SETs) are a key source of the data used to measure student perceptions of teaching effectiveness and inform personnel decisions (Seldin, 1993). SETs are a widely accepted tool for obtaining students' feedback on an instructor's ability to teach and on students' level of engagement in course activities. Alternatively, mid-semester feedback (MSF) offers a new technique for assessing classroom dynamics, student engagement, and students' day-to-day experiences, which can inform meaningful improvement of the teaching and learning process.

The MSF initials can also stand for *midterm student feedback* and the technique is sometimes known by its formal name, *Small Group Instructional Diagnosis* (SGID). The method "is a systematic procedure for collecting data about the student experience in a given course" (Nyquist & Wulff, 2011, p. 51). Joseph Clark and Mark Redmond conducted foundational research and introduced the SGID at the University of Washington in 1982. Their goal was to create and test a content-rich approach to diagnostic assessment of courses that yielded more abundant qualitative feedback for the instructor than end-of-semester questionnaires and was more practical and time-efficient than in-depth observation and analysis done by instructional consultants. They chose the term *feedback* rather than *evaluation* in order to stress the formative, constructive nature of the technique (Clark & Redmond, 1982).

Although the MSF is not designed to replace SETs as the primary source of student feedback, it is a valuable supplement that can inform an instructor's thinking about the student experience. Occurring at the midpoint of a course, the MSF informs students and the instructor about what is and what is not working while time still remains for adjustments. Scheduling time for an MSF enables a systematic, formative evaluation of instruction on a specific student population in a given semester and enlightens instructional decisions for future semesters.

MSF provides instructors with a broader and deeper view of their teaching decisions and behaviors than they are likely to gain otherwise. Stephen Brookfield (1995) describes a critically reflective teacher as one who cultivates a heightened awareness of his or her teaching from as many different perspectives as possible. Although Brookfield notes that gathering feedback from learners is "of utmost importance" (p. 35), he recommends that instructors examine their teaching through three additional lenses: (a) one's own point of view, or self-reflection; (b) peers, who can provide advice, feedback, and mentoring; and (c) the scholarly literature, also known as the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). All our recommended MSF interventions support instructors in using the lenses of student feedback and self-reflection to consider the teaching-and-learning dynamic in their classroom. In addition, some variations also incorporate peer feedback and instructional consultants who can bring SoTL into the conversation.

No matter which approach is employed, MSF is designed to yield formative feedback for instructors. Such feedback is most likely to motivate and enable them to make changes in instruction when it is "specific, timely, corrective and positively framed" (Gormally, Evans, & Brickman, 2014, p. 193). The MSF is specific because it is conducted with students in a particular course context; it is timely because it occurs in the middle of the learning arc; it is corrective because it uncovers what "isn't working" for learners; and

it is positively framed because students are also invited to indicate what "is working" for them and to offer suggestions for improvement.

End-of-Semester Ratings: A Reality Check

SETs have served as the most widely acceptable source of teaching evaluation since they were introduced in the 1920s. Cohen's two well-known critical meta-analyses (1981, 1987) supported the validity of student ratings, especially global ratings of the instructor, as valid measures of student perceptions of teaching effectiveness. More recently, researchers have shown that SETs correlate positively with student achievement in the current course (Feldman, 1989a; 1989b), including robust positive and statistically significant associations between a measure of student learning and course evaluations (Beleche, Fairris, & Marks, 2012). Moreover, student self-reported ratings of learning correlate positively with student achievement on course examinations (Benton, Duchon, & Pallett, 2011).

Although the copious research on SETs continues to grow, SETs have their limitations as sources for evaluation and instructional improvement. For example, the Likert-scale format does not permit a nuanced, complex view of learners' experiences (Snooks, Neeley, & Williamson, 2004). Students are likely to invest little time and thought in providing anonymous feedback to instructors when they perceive its value as low in terms of actually influencing their own, or future students', instructional experiences (Caulfield, 2007). Additionally, some SETs do not yield concrete, helpful suggestions for improving a course, and the productive feedback that does come happens too late for any changes to be made in that particular academic term (Holton et al, 2016; McKeachie, 1999). Instructors may also have little or no support for interpreting the feedback—which may be vague and contradictory—in order to make meaningful changes even in future offerings of the course.

The limits of end-of-semester SETs can be a source of angst for instructors, especially because these evaluations are frequently used as the sole administrative tool to assess their teaching (Veeck, O'Reilly, MacMillan, & Yu, 2016). Although we are not recommending that instructors ignore their SETs, especially if SETs are part of their institutional culture around teaching, we endorse the MSF technique as a practical addition to the evaluation process and for stimulating productive dialogue about courses at mid-semester. The tool helps instructors build rapport with students, who report that the MSF technique helps improve communication between themselves and their instructors and deepens their awareness of the teaching and learning process, as well as the instructional constraints or context that the teacher faces (Diamond, 2004; Lewis, 2001).

The Original Mid-Semester Feedback Protocol

The original MSF protocol is a five-step process. With the assistance of a consultant, who helps gather the feedback and provides support, the instructor translates the feedback and creates an action plan for instructional improvement (Holton et al., 2016). This process is confidential, restricted to the instructor and the consultant, although filtered or summary results may be shared later for teaching portfolios or annual reviews, and is based on the original research and recommendations for the SGID protocol (Clark & Redmond, 1982).

Step One: Planning and Pre-Meeting

Instructors wishing to gather mid-semester feedback from their students should schedule a meeting with an instructional consultant who is trained in facilitating an MSF, often through the campus center for teaching and learning. These skilled individuals are typically instructional or curriculum designers or educational developers and are commonly trained in offering classroom observations and providing mid-semester feedback. (An instructor can contact the campus teaching center to determine if this service is provided. If not, the instructor can adopt one of the variations described subsequently that can be conducted with a peer or independently.) The purpose of this "pre-meeting" is to identify questions, concerns, or issues about "how the semester is going," so the consultant, who serves as the MSF facilitator, has the benefit of getting acquainted with the instructional context before entering the classroom and working with the students. The facilitator also describes the MSF procedure and timing in detail. Ideally, the instructor will have contacted the consultant prior to the beginning of the course, in order to identify the best mid-semester-dates for both parties on which to conduct the MSF.

Step Two: The Classroom Observation

On the agreed-upon date, the consultant serving as the MSF facilitator arrives at the start of the class session. The instructor briefly introduces the facilitator, who is there to observe the class session and gather anonymous feedback from students when the instructor departs before the end of class. The instructor should emphasize their mid-semester feedback is important for *making decisions or adjustments in the second half of the course* to support current students' success as well as to inform future semesters. Instructors should let students know that they value honest feedback and that their goal is to create a learning environment where everyone—both students and instructor—has the tools they need to be successful. Learners have a unique point of view regarding the course content, its challenges, and the class structure, which the instructor—as a subject-matter expert—does not have. Instructors should express encouragement, support, and appreciation to students for participating fully in the process. The facilitator then takes a seat at the back of the classroom (with a clear vantage point from which he or she can hear well), observes the class session quietly, and takes copious notes that will become part of the follow-up consultation with the instructor. Those notes are recorded separately from the student feedback but can be brought into context during the follow-up discussion with the instructor.

Step Three: Gathering Student Feedback

Thirty minutes before the end of the class session, the instructor stops teaching, turns the class over to the

facilitator, and leaves the classroom. The facilitator explains the step-by-step feedback process and assures students that their responses will remain anonymous, a key feature and benefit of the MSF. The facilitator emphasizes that the feedback will be valued by the instructor and will be used to make improvements in the current course and in future courses, thereby increasing student motivation to engage in the feedback process (Caulfield, 2007). Students must feel that they may safely offer candid and constructive feedback and that it will serve a useful function in terms of instructional improvement.

The facilitator asks students to organize themselves into small groups of 4 to 6 individuals. They are given 10 minutes to discuss the three questions below, work toward consensus on their responses, and prepare to report out to the entire class. Ten minutes puts appropriate pressure on the group to stay on task while permitting time for all contributions (Clark & Redmond, 1982).

- What is helping your learning in the course?
- What is hindering your learning in the course?
- What suggestions do you have for improving this course?

Although the literature on facilitating MSFs offers variations on the questions used to prompt student feedback, be thoughtful about how the questions are framed. We prefer a less-specific, more open-ended approach in the first two questions, because it invites a wider range of responses from learners. Phrasing the questions this way, as opposed to "What is the instructor doing that helps your learning?" avoids the assumption that the instructor's behavior or choices are solely responsible for shaping the learning experience. An inaccessible textbook, an 8:00 a.m. start time, or a tough assignment may be some of the barriers students are encountering in a course, so framing the question appropriately allows for those issues to emerge.

Providing a handout that lists the three questions, along with space for each volunteer "group scribe" to write down the group members' responses, facilitates the process. Using a handout helps students stay focused during their group work and ensures that all input is captured if the class session ends before all groups report out.

Once groups have used their allotted time to discuss and record their feedback, the facilitator uses a whiteboard, chalkboard, or digital document projected on a screen to capture the input as accurately as possible. Each group is asked to report its responses to each of the three questions. For efficiency, the facilitator can place an asterisk next to any feedback that echoes an earlier group's input. This not only saves time during the reporting process but helps the consultant identify areas of consensus. Students are generally better at offering up their complaints than they are at generating suggestions, but the facilitator can use one of their valuable solutions to request more details or depth in their thinking (Weimer, 2016). At the conclusion of the groups' reporting-out segment, the facilitator gathers each group's written responses (without student names included), thanks the students for their time and input, and dismisses the class.

Step Four: The Follow-Up Consultation

In preparation for a follow-up confidential meeting with the instructor, the facilitator reviews the student feedback and group responses, with the goal of organizing the input in aggregate form, arranged by frequency and theme. Examples, salient details, and student commentary should be represented as accurately and fairly as possible. One-off, singular comments and suggestions should be filtered with extreme care, especially those that may evoke a strong emotional response in the instructor.

At the follow-up face-to-face meeting, the facilitator walks the instructor through the compiled feedback document, helping to interpret the comments and bring them into context with additional information. This meeting is considered the most difficult step in the MSF process (Clark & Redmond, 1982), because the instructor may find the feedback by turns surprising, affirming, validating, or just plain painful to read. The facilitator can remind the instructor that the feedback is a gift, because students are helping the instructor learn more about them and their perceptions of the learning process and the instructor's efforts and decisions. Consciously approaching the discussion of the feedback from this perspective often makes this step productive.

The facilitator's role during the follow-up consultation is to help instructors derive meaning from the feedback and decide when and how to make specific changes in both the short and long term. The facilitator may ask the instructor questions about the feedback, such as What is surprising? Are there any "a-ha!" moments? What is going well in the class from your students' point of view? What is confusing or challenging? Is there feedback you simply don't understand? Discrepancies in the data, for instance, are commonplace: Some students dislike group work, others find it valuable; some find a written reflection assignment beneficial, others think it's a waste of time. Such variations can spark interesting conversations, clarifications, and reconsiderations. As an example, even if the instructor is 100% certain that he or she has described the course grading policy multiple times, if more than one student finds the grading policy confusing, this feedback warrants consideration.

Ideally, the MSF facilitator and instructor meet before the instructor's next class session, which makes for a quick turnaround in organizing and reviewing feedback and for preparing a response to students. If it is not possible to meet before the next class, the meeting should take place as soon thereafter as possible so that the instructor can respond to the students at the next available class period. One of the biggest mistakes an instructor can make is to ask students for their candid, thoughtful feedback but not acknowledge and respond to that feedback in a timely manner.

Step Five: Instructor's Response to Students

As noted above, closing the loop with students after the MSF session is essential. Beverly Black (1998) observes that the verbal exchange of ideas in class sets up the expectation in students that changes will be made, more so than if they had each completed a strictly written survey. An instructor who disregards students' feedback, Black notes, can create disgruntled students and a disaffected class atmosphere. Thus, it is vital that the consultant and the instructor discuss in depth how the instructor will respond to students' feedback and what specifically will be said.

A productive way to organize the closing-the-loop conversation with students is for the instructor to decide which changes or adjustments should be made in the time remaining in the course, which changes will be deferred to future semesters, and which changes will not be made and why. The following structure is one way of organizing an instructor's response to student MSF input.

- small tweaks and modifications for the remaining semester (e.g., "low-hanging fruit" that is straightforward, noncontroversial, and easy to implement, such as adding a 5-minute break during a long class session)
- more substantive changes that can and will change for the remaining semester (e.g. dropping an assignment or providing lecture outlines to students)
- considerations for future semesters (e.g., good ideas that, practically speaking, simply can't be implemented immediately such as rethinking the textbook choice)
- what can't or won't change and why, *from a pedagogical perspective* (e.g., group work that is a central component of the course)

We advise instructors not to acquiesce to all changes suggested by students but rather to focus on addressing what is feasible, meaningful, and likely to enhance the learning experience. That being said, if it is possible to respond to some of the students' specific suggestions right away, it will likely foster goodwill and positive rapport.

If possible, instructors should quantify the qualitative data in anticipation of sharing the results with students. For example, Lewis (2001) recommends this framing: "Forty-five percent of you thought X was something that was really impeding your learning and that I need to change. I've considered what I might do differently, and here's what I've decided. . . ." Some instructors create tables and graphs of their data, and others make handouts or PowerPoint presentations. Instructors should choose a response that is authentic, whether it is brief and matter-of-fact or engages students in an extended discussion. As noted previously, contradictory or confusing input can be rich fodder for discussion. Students can help the instructor tease out concerns or identify tricky issues without the assumption that there will be neat, perfect answers to every item. Finally, instructors need not feel that they must respond to every suggestion or comment offered as part of the MSF; the goal is to be thoughtful and transparent in the follow-up discussion with students without addressing every issue that they have raised point by point.

Variations on the Mid-Semester Feedback Process

The five-step process just described is considered the gold-standard MSF protocol. For maximum benefit, instructors should expect to set aside no fewer than five hours for the pre- and post-meetings with the MSF facilitator, response-planning time, and closing the loop with students. Instructors must realistically assess how much time they are willing and able to commit to the process. If an instructor cannot set aside a minimum of five hours of his or her own time, we don't recommend this particular MSF protocol. Instructors who are short on time and resources or who do not have access to a trained faculty consultant on their campus may wish to explore the following variations on the traditional MSF approach instead.

Bare Bones Questionnaire (BBQ)

The Bare Bones Questionnaire (BBQ) was developed by a small group of instructors at the University of Houston–Clear Lake. Their approach was directly inspired by the traditional SGID process (as devised by Clark and Redmond, 1982) as well as by the more informal classroom assessment method known as the group instructional feedback technique (GIFT), proposed by Angelo and Cross (1993). The BBQ involves a structured, highly efficient, peer-centered feedback-collection protocol. The Houston instructors note in their article that the BBQ is more abbreviated than the SGID but is also more structured and collegial than the GIFT. The BBQ "is designed to provide maximum amounts of valid and useful information for faculty at the least possible cost in time" (Snooks et al., 2004, p. 112). Through trial and error, employing the SGID or MSF steps with "empathetic peers" in the absence of access to trained consultants, they boiled their MSF down to the following three steps:

1. A host-instructor invites a colleague-facilitator to visit during the last 30 minutes of a specific class session near the middle of the semester to gather feedback from students. Using a variation on the same three questions recommended in the traditional MSF process, the colleague-facilitator distributes a handout to students, who work in small groups to provide input. The BBQ questions are as follows:

   - What does the instructor do in the class that helps you learn?
   - What hinders your learning in this class?
   - What are the two specific suggestions of ways to improve your learning in this class?

   During the report-out section, the colleague-facilitator captures student feedback and suggestions, confirming consensus as the session progresses. This step seems identical to the MSF input-gathering one (step 3) described previously.

2. The colleague-facilitator summarizes the student responses and meets with the instructor before the next class session. The face-to-face meeting allows for follow-up questions, clarification of responses, and sharing the details of student feedback. This meeting is often reassuring when instructors discover that their peers deal with the same concerns, regardless of academic discipline. The role of the colleague-facilitator is that of an empathetic peer who is "an intelligent and honest transmitter of information," not a trained consultant (Snooks et al., 2004, p. 117).

3. The instructor-host reports back to students at the next class session, thanks them for their input, summarizes the salient points, checks for accuracy on the interpretation of key comments or issues, and discusses planned or potential changes for the rest of the course.

When the BBQ program was launched, demand for the service outstripped the available facilitators (Snooks et al., 2004). The authors developed a BBQ training program that was similarly time-efficient. Their collegial training program consists of a faculty member observing a BBQ done in another classroom by an experienced colleague-facilitator; the BBQ is then carried out in the new colleague's classroom by an experienced colleague-facilitator; at a later time the new colleague facilitates a BBQ in another colleague's classroom. The logistics of the classroom visits and follow-up meetings are easily arranged through email. Pairing up colleagues from across departments or disciplines reassures students that their input and identity is less likely to get filtered back to the host-instructor.

For a peer-driven BBQ process to work, ethical behavior and trust are essential. The host-instructors must be assured that the feedback is strictly confidential and won't be shared with other students, colleagues, or supervisors. They must also have good reason to believe that their students' input was shared accurately and was not exaggerated or softened by the colleague-facilitator. The BBQ process can enhance collegiality and rapport among instructors. By being both a facilitator and a host, faculty come to deepen their appreciation for the validity of student feedback in their own classroom (Snooks et al., 2004).

DIY Mid-Semester Feedback

When peers or instructional consultants are not available to conduct an MSF in conjunction with an instructor, a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach is an alternative. In our own work as educational developers, we have adopted a four-step process that empowers individual faculty to collect meaningful formative feedback from their students to guide appropriate midcourse adjustments. These DIY MSFs can be administered as an online survey or via a collaborative process.

Online Survey. Whether instructors are teaching face-to-face or online, they can incorporate the three central questions from the traditional MSF process into a simple electronic survey for students in the middle of the semester. Using an electronic method helps ensure the anonymity of the responses. Without a facilitator, it is important that the instructor set the tone to help students make the most of the process by assuring them that their responses are anonymous and preparing them for what to expect at each step.

On the predetermined date, the instructor reminds students about the MSF and invites them to thoughtfully complete the survey questions, explaining that their feedback will be reviewed and valued, and that an overview and discussion of results and implications will be shared with them at the next class session. Once the survey closes, the instructor must review and organize the input following the same principles mentioned previously. As with the other approaches, closing the loop is a critical step that the instructor must intentionally and thoughtfully execute.

The survey approach to MSF ensures that individual voices "don't get lost," which can happen in the small-group formats where students strive for consensus (Black, 1998, p. 260). In this variation, the onus is on the instructor to find the important patterns and themes in the feedback.

Collaborative Survey. The collaborative-survey MSF technique was created by four educators who designed and researched an MSF process in which their students, arranged randomly in small groups, reported at midterm on three prompts through use of a shared online document on Google Docs (Veeck et al., 2016). The prompts are as follows:

- What should your instructor *stop* doing?
- What should your instructor *start* doing?
- What should your instructor *continue* doing?

Students can be divided into small groups to discuss the prompts and comment asynchronously and anonymously on the document, building on the other groups' remarks by adding multiple perspectives on key issues, offering up relevant examples, and making wide-ranging suggestions. The authors find that this kind of collaborative tool can prompt the "interactive and synergistic advantages associated with focus groups" and actually elevate the feedback (Veeck et al., 2016, p. 157). Because the comments are public, accountability is strengthened both for the students, who may be less likely to make inappropriate or self-serving remarks when their peers can openly disagree or refute their contributions, and for the instructor, who will be expected to address the students' input in good faith.

The instructor should first give students practice in using a Google Doc by asking them an innocuous question, such as "What is your favorite Halloween candy?" Once they have practice in collaboratively adding to the Google Doc, randomly assigned groups of 4 to 8 students are given the prompts, with explicit instructions to be respectful of one another's comments. The instructor reminds students of the purpose of the process and how their input will be used. As with previous

approaches, instructors must then synthesize, interpret, and act on the input.

This open-feedback process is not without risks. Students may make comments that create "public discomfiture for the instructor or for their fellow students" (Veeck et al., 2016, p. 167) and may not be constructive. The collaborative online method may, therefore, work best in small, upper-level classes in which the instructor has established rapport with students. Veeck and colleagues reported that students enjoyed completing the online evaluation, found it easy to navigate, and felt that it gave them the ability to give high-quality feedback compared to the traditional SETs given at the end of the semester.

Investments and Rewards of the MSF Process

No matter which MSF format instructors select, they must fully commit to the process, from start to finish. Instructors should first identify their questions and collection methods, determine whether to provide incentives (e.g., offer points for completing the MSF), devote time to thoughtful review and analysis of the data (alone or with a peer), and then create an action plan for responding to students. By definition, MSFs are time-sensitive endeavors. The entire process must happen within a very short window during the middle of the semester. Instructors should select survey questions, determine the data-collection methods, and finalize the dates of both the survey administration and response to students *before* the semester begins. They should also coordinate the MSF dates with a faculty consultant or peer and note the dates on the course syllabus.

Arranging time to gather mid-semester feedback can yield many benefits. Mid-semester feedback gives instructors a reliable way to find out what students are thinking before the end of the semester and allows them to build rapport with learners (Lewis, 2001). Diamond (2004) found that instructors who engaged in the SGID process at midterm reported a heightened awareness of how their "educational techniques and approaches are perceived by students" and increased confidence in the appropriateness of methodologies in the classroom and in future courses (p. 226). She concluded that the midterm-feedback protocol is "useful too in motivating, creating, and maintaining change" regarding strengthening teaching. The process—and the resulting adjustments based on student feedback—can increase student engagement and enjoyment in the course, especially if the instructor follows up in visible, intentional ways (Holton et al., 2016) and adopts student suggestions (Weimer, 2016). Unlike SETs, the MSF protocol—whether done independently by the instructor or with a facilitator—permits instructors to gather specific, qualitative feedback and suggestions while there is still time to make changes or adjustments that improve the experience for current students and enhance an instructor's effectiveness (Lewis, 2001).

This process may actually mitigate frustrations that may otherwise be expressed in the SETs when the course has concluded (Veeck et al., 2016). Moreover, the detailed student input and rich, qualitative suggestions from MSFs are superior to the feedback that accompanies the typical SET forms (Veeck et al., 2016). Furthermore, although the feedback is tied to a specific course and assignments, which illuminates the current students' immediate experiences, it serves as baseline data that can be revisited. It can also become a rich set of data for a teaching dossier or professional portfolio (Lewis, 2001). Finally, instructors benefit from the input of colleagues or consultants, which offers a structured and supportive opportunity for self-reflection (Holton et al., 2016).

Careful advance planning and thoughtful structuring of the MSF process minimizes uncertainty for faculty and students alike. Moreover, when approached as a data-driven instructional intervention, faculty are empowered to tap into the analytic and research skills (i.e., habits of mind) that they already possess. At its core, the MSF process is about empowering learning, liberating instructors to collect and respond to student input on their own terms, and opening constructive dialogue among instructors and students about the shared endeavor of teaching and learning.

Patricia R. Payette is the executive director of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) at the University of Louisville and senior associate director of the University of Louisville's Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning. Patty leads her staff in the design, development, and assessment of the QEP, a multiyear initiative focused on an innovative enhancement in undergraduate education that reaches across academic and cocurricular programs. Additionally, Patty provides leadership and expertise to other components of the Delphi Center. She regularly consults with other institutions on their curricular initiatives and conducts teaching and learning workshops on a broad array of topics. She earned her Ph.D. from the Department of English at Michigan State University. She has authored numerous essays, reviews, and articles and currently coauthors a series on teaching for critical thinking for The National Teaching and Learning Forum.

Marie Kendall Brown, associate director for teaching, learning, and innovation at the University of Louisville's Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning, designs and administers programs, services, and events to support faculty professional development regarding teaching. She also oversees day-to-day operations of the center's new Teaching Innovation Learning Lab. Her research interests include faculty learning and development, teaching and learning topics in STEM, strategic partnering with academic units, and factors that influence innovation and creativity in the classroom. She earned her Ph.D. in higher education from the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education. She is co-editor of a new book from Stylus Publishing titled Adjunct Faculty Voices: Cultivating Professional Development at the Front Lines of Higher Education.

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T: 800.255.2757
T: 785.320.2400

301 South Fourth St., Suite 200
Manhattan, KS 66502-6209
E: info@IDEAedu.org
IDEAedu.org

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