

# Practices And Value Of A Professional Learning Community In Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

*It is important for leadership teams and faculty members in higher education to create an atmosphere of trust as new and improved ideas are addressed in a professional learning community setting. Prior to the past ten years, many faculty members at the university have been accustomed to working somewhat independently in their own discipline. However, today, more university leaders and faculty members are reaching out to one another to discuss issues or concerns within the organization. For the purpose of this research, emphasis will be placed on definition of a professional learning community, characteristics of a professional learning community, ways to improve teaching and learning, models of collaborative learning, effectiveness of professional learning communities and evaluating a professional learning community.*

**Keywords:** Professional Learning Community; Characteristics; Shared Vision; Collaborative; Models; Evaluating

## INTRODUCTION

Professional learning communities are commonly found in higher education settings today. With the increase and focus on improving teaching and learning, more faculty and staff are seeking ways to improve the quality of teaching and learning by using the professional learning community approach. A professional learning community is a way of operating practices held by leadership teams and faculty members. A more typical professional learning community is composed of team members who regularly collaborate toward continued improvement in meeting students' academic, social and cultural needs through a shared vision. The leadership team and faculty members are consistently seeking ways to maintain high standards for all students by improving instructional practices.

## DEFINITION OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

There is not any one definition for a professional learning community. However, the most common definition of a professional learning community is made up of a leadership team and faculty members as a collaborative group who seek to improve the learning experiences for students through a shared vision. Further efforts are used by the leadership team and faculty members that show supportive leadership, writing lessons by the team, and providing appropriate support from formative and summative assessment needs. Today, many faculty members are using technology tools to improve the curriculum and the instructional process. By definition, there is much value added to a professional learning community when there is a continued effort to work collaboratively to improve the professional development for faculty and educational experiences for students (Dufour, 2004).

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

There are many types of learning communities. The most common type is a staff development focused community that uses strategies and data to improve the teaching and learning experiences for students and faculty in higher education. The learning community team practices targeting a particular issue or concern for organizational improvement. Engaging learning communities at the university are interested in sharing what they are learning to improve the university's instructional programs and an attitude of continuous inquiry of solving problems. Faculty members along with students must be thinking in terms of having a systemic-mind set in order to be productive as they train and develop students to be productive and successful in the career marketplace.

With students, faculty, university leaders, and staff, these are the common characteristics of practices held among team members: shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, shared learning in a collective manner and planning strategically for continuous university improvement in teaching and learning (Van de, Erkens, Schmidt & Renshaw, 2000).

### **WAYS TO IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In order for universities to graduate students who are successful in the marketplace globally, it is essential that the quality of teaching and learning is current and relevant. Teaching and learning must relate to real-world experiences. Improving teaching and learning must be targeted and intentionally based on what is expected from marketplace employers today and the future not yesterday. Many universities seek to align the curriculum with standards and students' work which is evaluated by pre-determined rubrics. Standards are formed overall by research outcomes from various educationally linked programs and a view of how international educational institutions are being successful. At universities today, students know in advance what the expectations are early per university program. However, universities must move swiftly in staff developing faculty and having students appropriately prepared to keep up with trends and issues in the marketplace. Students must be taught and trained to be competitive in the marketplace globally. If our students are not taught or trained with relevant information at the university, many of our students will be left behind and we cannot afford that as a country economically speaking. There is a need to review models of collaboration that have a reputation of success (Little, Kruse, Louis, Bryk & McLaughlin, 2001).

### **MODELS OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND DECISION MAKING**

The model for collaborative learning and decision-making is thinking and acting as a team for improving teaching and learning for students and faculty. The cohort model is practice when faculty members in the same department work together to improve instruction and management by providing academic, emotional and logistical support to solve specific problems or concerns in the department or unit.

Using the topic model area for improving a discipline such as mathematics can bring more comfort when individuals are working together. The use of collaborative teaching and learning in a classroom, could involve students and faculty working together to complete a common task related to a research topic, as an example, in geometry is another model for joint scholarly research (Siegel, 2005). For example, there could be a group of 3 to 6 students and faculty members working on a given topic. Faculty and students working together could continue to play an important role in fostering mathematics research in higher education in the United States and developing countries. These collaborative efforts could help to promote diversity, while at the same time striving to maintain a vibrant research community.

Working alone, a faculty or student may not perform as higher quality work according to many researchers. The collaborative approach creates a time and place for faculty and students to communicate in a less formal manner, but still being able to maintain a professional relationship in getting the task accomplished through talk of support and respect. There are simple ways to determine the impact of the collaborative model for the learning community (Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000).

### **EFFECTIVENESS OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY**

In order to determine that the professional learning community is effective, these are some simple measuring exhibits. Effectiveness must be best cited by ultimate impact that the professional learning community has had on teaching and learning for students and faculty. Based on the prescribe goals and objectives, what was met and to what extent, changes you see by data review and what you can see related to a change in behavior of students and faculty at the university. This type of observation can help to evaluate the effectiveness of the professional learning community in a measurable manner formally and informally (Guskey & Sparks, 1998).

## **EVALUATING A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY**

From a prescribed rubric, a professional learning community could be evaluated from good (3) points to excellent (4) points. The rubric titles could ask the following questions: are students reflective learners, pro-active in community learning and balance; are faculty members collaborative with their colleagues, receive appropriate professional development; does the university provide resources to all faculty and staff; is there evidence of a positive learning environment at the university; and is there evidence that stakeholders are encouraged to participate in learning community activities (Yendol-Silva, 2003).

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on literature review information, professional learning communities have a practical use and they are beneficial and add value to an educational organization, because learning communities help to create an environment of sharing ideas, trust and collaboration that improves teaching and learning and management at the university. Faculty, students, university leaders, and staff are able to work together in a collaborative manner to improve their own learning experiences and to ensure that students will be prepared with skills, knowledge and an appropriate attitude to be competitive in the marketplace in a global society.

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