

Proposal Regarding a Center for Faculty Excellence

Committee on Instruction
in collaboration with the Academic Deans

May 1, 2011

We submit this proposal in response to the charge we were given from the College's Strategic Plan:

Explore the need for and establishment of a center that enhances and supports the campus culture of teaching, learning, research, and scholarship.

This charge addresses the core of the College's Mission:

The SUNY College at Oneonta unites excellence in teaching, scholarship, civic engagement, and stewardship to create a student-centered learning community.

Consistent with this Mission, our Vision¹ claims that Oneonta

... strives to be a leader in teaching with distinction and innovation ...

Teaching—more specifically, *good teaching*—lies at the heart of our collective mission. Our campus statements describing what we value and what we strive to become were developed and adopted through campus-wide participation; thus, they serve as a self-imposed call to purposeful action toward yet-to-be-realized goals. One of these goals is the nurturing of excellent instruction within the various learning contexts that we are responsible to lead.

In the recent past, our Committee has tried (unsuccessfully) to promote our teaching colleagues as valuable sources of dialogue and feedback in the endeavor of improving teaching. With the rejection of that proposal, the inevitable alternative at present is to rely heavily on student feedback. Although it is always appropriate and useful to attend to the perspective of students, we continue to maintain that reliance on student opinion is not sufficient for personnel decision-making nor for improving one's teaching.

Yet we remain eager to encourage our colleagues toward participating in activities that yield meaningful, lasting improvements in pedagogical skill. We sympathize with the reluctance to insert additional commitments into already overburdened faculty schedules, yet our institutional goals demand that we place the development of proficiency in teaching as a key priority.

This priority requires a collective effort. The best institutional models of quality teaching were not achieved through faculty members' solitary efforts nor

through isolated independence of programs or disciplines. Can you imagine a campus that "*strives to be a leader in teaching with distinction and innovation*" whose faculty vigorously defend their instructional spaces and techniques as off-limits to collaborative discussion? Or whose faculty insist that they can independently improve their own teaching? Such isolationist views are incompatible with the College's vision of "*teaching with distinction and innovation.*" We cannot claim to be scholars in the truest sense if we prohibit empirical examination of this major area of our professional work.

Methodology

To help us formulate a proposal with recommendations regarding the establishment of a Center for Faculty Excellence, we utilized several sources of information.

Data Sources

Faculty survey. We conducted a survey of all teaching faculty to determine if there was sufficient interest to warrant the creation of a Center for Faculty Excellence and to collect information regarding what types of development opportunities were most desired among our teaching faculty.

Directors at other institutions. We also looked to the wisdom of individuals at other institutions that have established similar centers. In this area we wish to credit the work of Oneonta's Task Force on Academic Excellence, whose groundwork informed our deliberations. In particular, the Task Force recorded telephone interviews with directors of a few teaching centers at institutions around the U.S. The experience and insight of these directors was very helpful in guiding our own work.

Independent policy and research institute. The Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL, which is part of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching) has a history of successfully coordinating faculty professional development training for hundreds of institutions. Their documentation has provided us with useful materials related to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

¹ The College at Oneonta Mission and Vision statements can be found at <http://www.oneonta.edu/mvsp/>

Findings

Faculty Survey

The results from our faculty survey were very promising. We had a response rate of 17%, which is a satisfactory proportion of participation for survey research. There was strong interest in focused, diligent efforts to improve teaching on this campus. The aggregate data are presented in the Appendix.

Directors at Other Institutions

The most striking lesson we learned from the experience of Directors of similar centers at other campuses was the importance of sharply limiting the activities of a nascent Center. These seasoned colleagues unequivocally stated that doing a small number of things well at the outset is critical to garnering the respect of faculty and the ultimate success of the Center.

We were also very interested to learn that some of these centers are experiencing their greatest successes with longer (2-3 days) workshops that are accompanied by a \$500 stipend. These events allow faculty to experience immersion in a specific pedagogical technique and come away with usable materials to implement in their own teaching. The benefit to the Center is that these faculty become advocates of the technique, recruiting other faculty and thus increasing enrollments in subsequent workshops.

Independent Policy and Research Institute

Most of our questions on the faculty survey came from CASTL materials. CASTL has been deeply involved in the professional development of higher-education faculty for a number of years and has published many useful documents on this topic. Their approach requires commitment by a small number of tenured faculty members to follow through with their own professional development activities, stating clearly focused teaching goals and conducting an honest evaluation of progress toward those goals as an act of scholarship. Given the success of the CASTL program at other institutions, it would be irresponsible for us not to consider adopting their approach.

Recommendations

Having briefly described our findings, we now offer the following recommendations.

Limited Scope, Focus on Teaching

Although there are many needs that could be met by a Center for Faculty Excellence, the wisdom of experience from directors at other centers informs us that trying to accomplish too many tasks, especially in the early phases, would be a significant misstep. Because the primary task of faculty at Oneonta is teaching, and because teaching receives the highest priority in our institutional documents, we believe it is most

prudent to concentrate significant energies there. Additionally, other avenues for assistance with research and service activities already exist (e.g., Grants Development Office, Center for Social Responsibility and Community). After the Center staff have shown themselves capable of making a substantial and sustained impact on the pedagogical skills of faculty, additional services can be offered.

We suggest that the earliest activities of the Center (within the first two years) focus on those aspects of teaching most strongly requested by faculty in our recent survey (see the Appendix for complete details). Specifically, those items are:

- help foster an understanding of cognitive and affective teaching and learning
- help instructors reflect on and critique their own teaching
- disseminate information of effective teaching practices to the faculty

Based on our deliberations and practices at other institutions, further suggestions for early activities include:

- coordinating discussion of common readings related to aspects of teaching that would be of interest to participating faculty
- hosting an e-mail list that disseminates empirical findings related to teaching in higher education

During the first year, one or two speakers from outside the College could be brought in to help promote College-wide dialogue on the topics that are being discussed by the faculty involved with the Center.

Director

We recommend conducting a national search for a highly qualified, full-time Director to lead the Center. The Director must have substantial successful experience in teaching (i.e., be a “master teacher”) at the college level and must be well read in the literatures of multiple disciplines, including educational psychology and the various disciplinary pedagogical journals (e.g., *Journal of Chemical Education*, *Journal of College Science Teaching*, *Journal of Economics Education*, *Journal of Marketing Education*, *Teaching of Psychology*, and others). The Director must also have expertise in identifying, evaluating, and interpreting appropriate evidence of pedagogical outcomes.

Because the success of the Center is dependent upon the capabilities of the Director, it is essential that the Director has at least 5 years of prior experience in part-time (at least 50% appointment) or full-time faculty development.

The Director’s responsibilities will include defining the charge of the Center, hopefully in language understood by all, and maintaining the integrity of the programming offered by the Center.

Placement Within College Hierarchy

We recommend that the Center’s Director report directly to the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. Because the work of the Center is fo-

cused exclusively on academic matters, it is most appropriate for the Center to operate within Academic Affairs. However, we wish to strongly emphasize that most of the Director’s work with specific faculty members must remain confidential from the Provost in order that the formative outcomes of developing the pedagogical skills of faculty members will not negatively affect summative personnel decisions made by the Provost. Therefore, annual reports submitted to the Provost and all other reporting requirements *must* exclude the disclosure of faculty identities and other details that could compromise confidentiality.

Relationship to TLTC

We wish to thank Jim Greenberg of the TLTC for his consultation during this review process. It has been clear to us all along that the TLTC plays a vital role in supporting pedagogical technologies. However, the charge of the TLTC is specific to *technology*, not *pedagogy*; therefore, the work of the TLTC is distinct from, yet relevant to, the work of the proposed Center for Faculty Excellence.

Another pertinent consideration is that the College’s technology services—including the TLTC—were recently consolidated under the Finance and Administration division. We do not wish to complicate that recent work by attempting to split off a piece of technology services (i.e., TLTC) and incorporate it as an integral component of the Center for Faculty Excellence under the Academic Affairs division. Given the spirit of cooperation that exists between these two organizational branches, we are confident that any administrative challenges can be resolved relatively quickly.

Proposed Timeline

Year 1

During the first year, a small, dedicated cadre of tenured faculty members will voluntarily commit themselves to active participation in the activities of the emerging Center. This “charter group” may be joined by any interested nontenured faculty; however, in order for the Center to continue functioning, there must be regular, active participation from at least five tenured faculty.

Following the Carnegie model, these five tenured faculty would be from different departments and would probably determine a long-term research project based on questions they have about their teaching and/or their students’ learning. The project and its results would be shared here on campus as well as disseminated to a broader audience through a conference presentation or peer-reviewed publication. This project could be a prototype for future projects that would be facilitated/coordinated/supported by the future Director. The charter group would combine their resourcefulness to possibly bring speakers to campus or share other information for the greater good.

At the end of Year 1, a mandatory evaluation will be conducted, focusing principally on the faculty (both tenured and nontenured) who have directly participated in Center activities, to determine whether there is sufficient interest to continue the development of the Center. ***If there is not sufficient interest at this checkpoint, the Center will not be further developed.***

Year 2 and Beyond

Contingent upon a successful outcome of the evaluation at the end of Year 1, a national search for an experienced Director will be held. The minimum qualifications for the Director position are detailed on page 2 of this document.

After the Director has served for one full year, another checkpoint evaluation will be conducted. This evaluation will focus on the effectiveness of the Director’s leadership to effect change in pedagogical practices across campus. The expectations for this evaluation must be realistic (seeing that the Director has served for only one year) and should focus on questions such as, *How many faculty members has the Center worked with over this past year?* and, *How deep and lasting is the impact of the Center on these faculty members?*

If this evaluation shows promising results, the Center may be given permission (by the Provost, in consultation with the Deans and voluntary input from faculty) to expand its scope in a gradual, controlled manner so as to maintain a high quality of service in all of its activities.

Summary and Conclusions

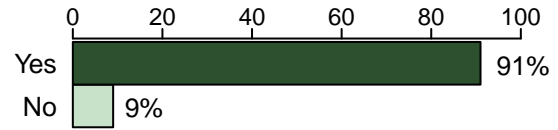
This proposal is tightly aligned with institutional priorities and draws from the wisdom of experiences at other institutions to provide the strongest potential for success in meeting these goals. We found our original charge to be undesirably vague; after spending a substantial amount of time attempting to better define our task, we narrowed our focus to goals made explicit through the Mission and Vision statements.

These recommendations commit the campus collectively to engage in earnest efforts to develop and maintain a high quality of instruction campus-wide. Because our campus Mission and Vision statements claim that we aspire to *excellence*, our committee will not support a proposal that results in half-measures. Especially during this period of restricted financial resources we cannot endorse weak, limited, nominal efforts that might impact a few faculty—which would essentially amount to a Center for Adequacy rather than a Center for Excellence.

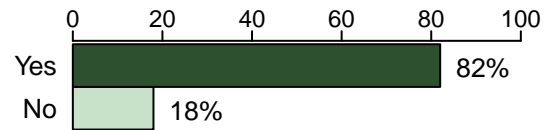
Over the long term, the actions we are recommending have the potential of augmenting Oneonta’s already positive reputation as a quality institution. *We can be even better*, rising to be a leader within our sector—and perhaps even more broadly—in the cultivation of genuinely outstanding quality in instruction.

Appendix
Survey Results ($N = 81$)

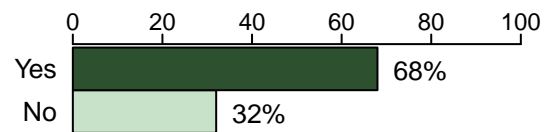
1. In principle, are you in favor of examining and improving teaching on this campus?



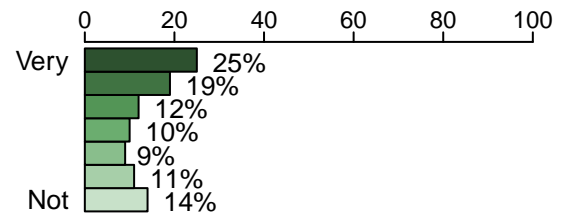
2. Do you have a desire to receive information (e.g., printed materials, personalized feedback, etc.) to help you improve your teaching?



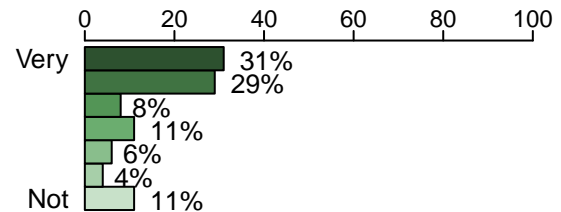
3. Do you believe that the teaching process should be public, subject to critical evaluation, and usable by others in both scholarship and helping other instructors on campus?



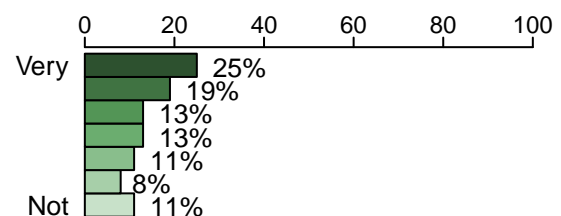
4a. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would celebrate instructors' contributions in the classroom and pedagogical progress?



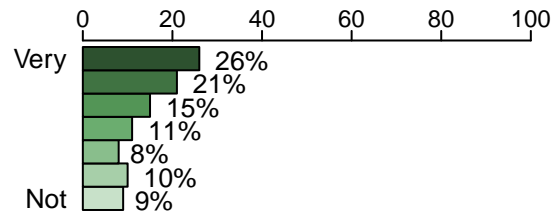
4b. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would help foster an understanding of cognitive and affective teaching and learning?



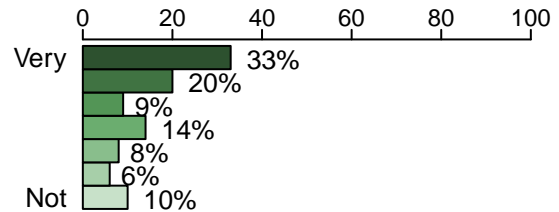
4c. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would help support holistic education theories and practices that promote civic and ethical engagement?



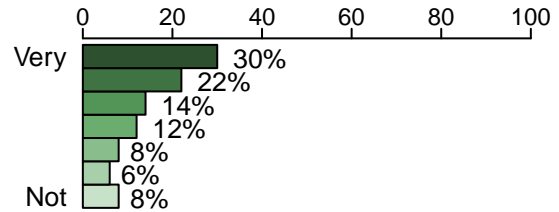
4d. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would support learning communities with similar teaching scholarship goals?



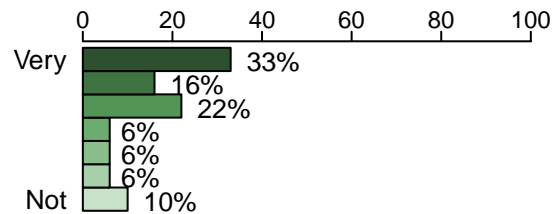
4e. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would support learning beyond campus borders?



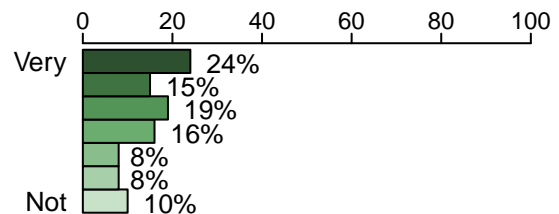
4f. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would collaborate with instructors to foster inquiry and leadership of student learning?



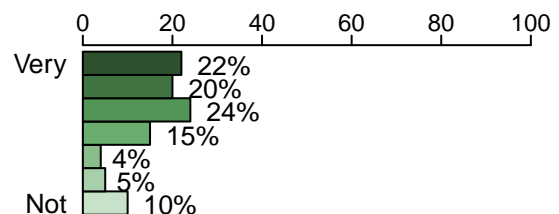
4g. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would help to connect instructors' research with their teaching?



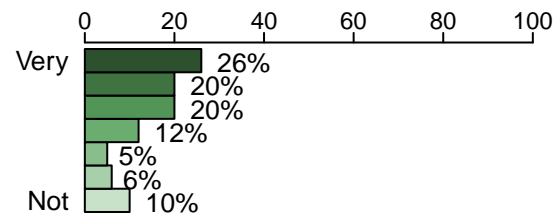
4h. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would document the work of teaching so it can be shared and improved upon with/by others?



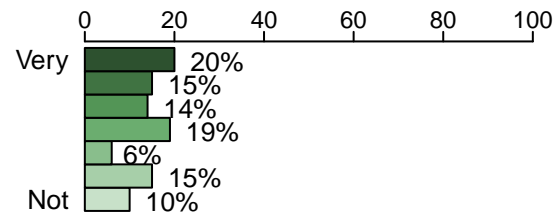
4i. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would help instructors define goals to improve teaching as an act of scholarship?



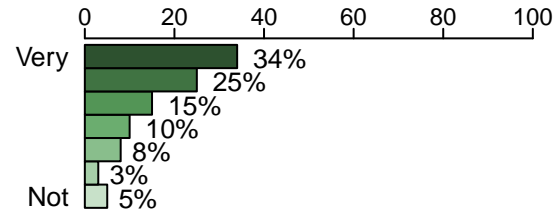
4j. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would help instructors identify appropriate methods of examining their own teaching as an act of scholarship?



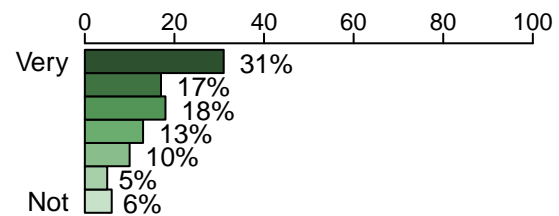
4k. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would create a format for presenting their scholarly examinations of teaching to others on campus?



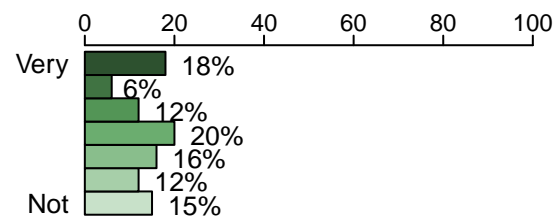
4l. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would help instructors reflect on and critique their own teaching?



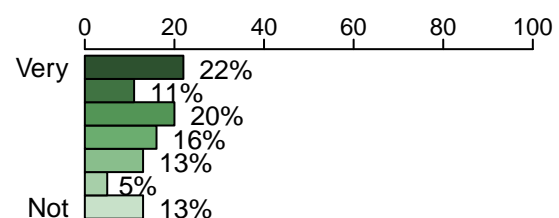
4m. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would work to build collaborative interdisciplinary teaching projects?



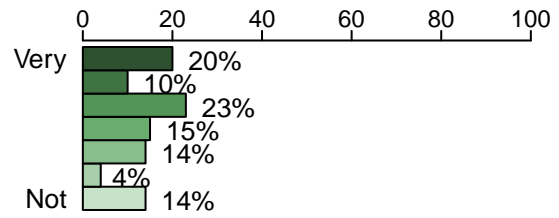
4n. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would help integrate teaching practices with other campuses?



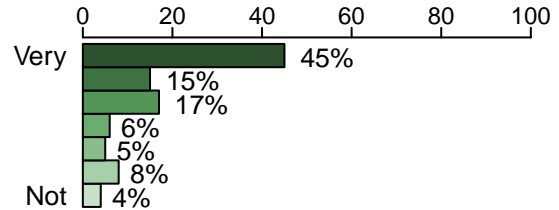
4o. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would help recognize a continuum of scholarship-of-teaching activities on campus?



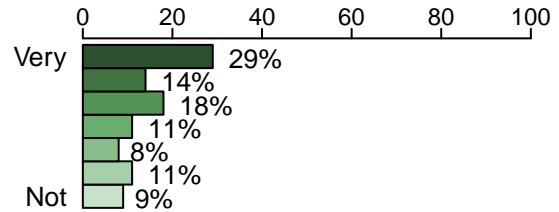
4p. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would help instructors establish/articulate personal, institutional, and professional scholarship-of-teaching projects?



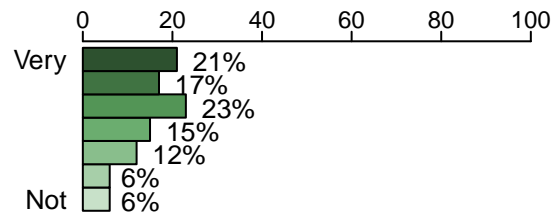
4q. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would disseminate information of effective teaching practices to the faculty?



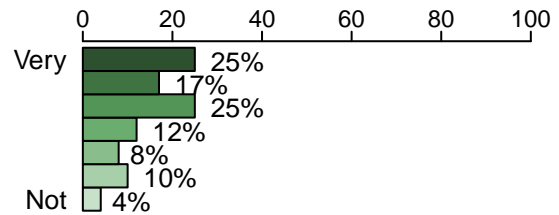
4r. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would help faculty network with other instructors who teach similar classes in the SUNY system?



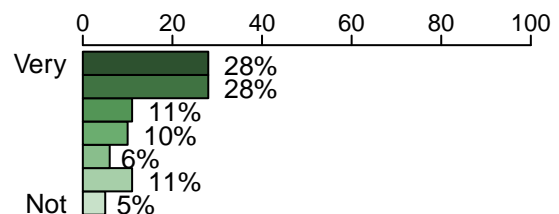
4s. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would investigate how to integrate student research and its impact on the institution?



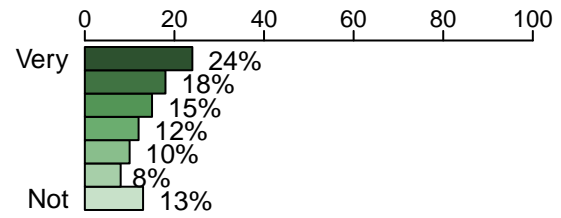
4t. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would help coordinate resources to support student/instructor collaborative research?



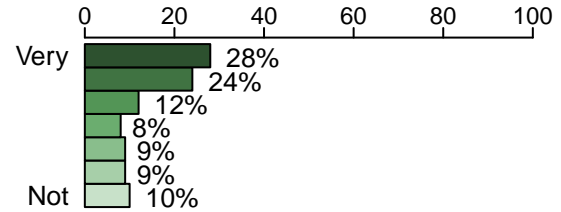
4u. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would study the effectiveness of learning spaces, course technology, and group projects?



4v. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would undertake activities that provide support and recognition for ongoing inquiry into evidence-based improvement of student learning?



4w. How important would it be to have a center on campus that would encourage and support investigation leading to a deeper understanding of how to sustain improvement in student learning?



5. Which of the following services would you likely utilize, if these were to be made available through a Center for Faculty Excellence at Oneonta (check all that apply)?

