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## [Faculty Learning Communities and Teaching Portfolios as a Mentoring Model](#)

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Faculty Learning Communities and Teaching Portfolios as a Mentoring Model

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Beginning a career in college or university teaching can be a terrifying exercise in trial and error. Unlike elementary and secondary school teachers, many college faculty members begin their teaching careers with little or no formal preparation in pedagogy. Despite being well-versed in the content discipline, faculty members in their first few semesters of teaching often lack access to the kind of frequent assessment and mentoring that would shorten the learning curve and enhance the experience for both instructor and student. Through the years, a number of different strategies have been proposed to foster interactions between college faculty members. Typically, mentoring of new faculty members is done as a one-to-one observation and evaluation model with a more experienced partner. A few models have incorporated multiple faculty members at differing stages of experience. These include teaching squares (Hafer, 2002), teaching triads (Belcher, 1998), and teaching circles (Martsof, 1999), each with the objective of improving the quality of teaching and learning. The expansion of these models to that of a “learning community” opens up even greater possibilities for approaching the peer-review process, while at the same time mentoring both new and experienced faculty members.

### Learning Communities

The concept of a “learning community” originated in the early 1930’s with the work of educational innovators like John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn. John Dewey’s work (1933) presented his view of education as a democratic process in which people come together to communicate and participate in shared problem solving that develops each learner’s individual abilities. Similarly, Meiklejohn (1932) pioneered a radically innovative experimental college curriculum in which a cohort of students studied the same topics at the same time and shared residence hall living space with faculty. Despite the promising start, institutional acceptance of learning communities as valid educational models did not begin to gain widespread acceptance in the United States until the 1990’s (Smith, 2001).

As colleges and universities began to explore the concept of learning communities, many different models were proposed and attempted, with varying degrees of success. In its simplest form, the learning community model focuses on bringing students into community through specific coursework. As an example, Gabelnick (1999) defines a learning community as “Any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the material entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise.” Over time, the definition of a learning community has expanded to include even more potential benefits of joining together for the purpose of enhanced learning. The California Learning Community College Network Learning Community uses a definition of a learning community as “a group of students and faculty collaboratively studying a theme or body of knowledge in two or more linked, clustered, or otherwise connected classes, unified by a common area of interest or career goal, and intentionally designed to restructure the students’ time, credit and learning experiences to foster more explicit intellectual and emotional connections between students, between students and their faculty, and between disciplines.” The number of formalized learning communities has continued to expand since the 1990s to include an estimated four to five hundred colleges (Smith, 2001).

In conjunction with this period of renewed interest and experimentation with the learning community concept, some common characteristics of successful learning communities have emerged. A review of learning communities operating in a variety of institutions reveals that, in general, successful learning community models share the following basic characteristics. They:

- Encourage student to student collaboration through cooperative learning
- Involve students in collaborative experiences with faculty
- Function as a source of academic and social support networks
- Integrate into existing curricular structure, but provide an interdisciplinary experience
- Focus faculty and students on knowledge building and learning outcomes

### Faculty Learning Communities

Traditionally, the term “learning community” has been most closely associated with models comprised of a cohort of first or second year undergraduate students enrolled in a group of courses and the faculty that teach those courses. Beginning in the 1970’s, however, a new model began to emerge of a learning community by and for faculty members, rather than directly for students (Cox, 2001). Milton Cox, a pioneer and advocate of the faculty learning community concept, has categorized faculty learning communities into two different groups, issue-focused and cohort-focused (Cox,1999). The issue-focused faculty learning community is similar in focus to the student learning communities, bringing together a group of faculty members who wish to engage in a cross-disciplinary study of a specific topic, often related to teaching and learning. Issue-focused faculty learning communities draw from across the demographic makeup of a campus, including members of varying ranks, disciplines and experience. In contrast, cohort-focused faculty learning communities focus on the teaching and learning needs of a particular cohort of faculty within the institution, usually junior faculty members. At Miami University, the Teaching Scholars Program brings junior faculty members together for seminars, retreats, and opportunities for mutual observation, assessment and practice of teaching techniques.

## The Burgeoning Retirement Crisis in the Community College System

The community college system is facing a period of upheaval caused by widespread retirements of the seasoned faculty members who entered in the expansion of the 1960's and 1970's. According to the nationwide "Faculty Survey 1998" by the Higher Education Research Institute in Los Angeles, 32 percent of college and university faculty are now over the age of 55, an increase from just 24 percent in 1989. The portion of faculty younger than 45 has decreased to 34 percent of the faculty population, compared with 41 percent a decade earlier. This information becomes more alarming in light of an impending boom of retirements. A 1999 survey indicated that 52 percent of full-time faculty members aged 55 to 64 reported planning to retire by 2004 (Schults, 2001).

The traditional mentoring model for junior faculty members relies heavily upon the formation of pairs with experienced teacher/mentors. The loss of so many experienced faculty members to retirement in a limited time frame will leave fewer mentors to service an increased number of novices. The faculty learning community provides a proven framework and model to bring this about.

### Faculty Portfolios

Portfolios have long been a means of documenting work in the arts. In those areas, a portfolio is a purposeful collection of work that exhibits the span of the creator's efforts, progress, and achievements. The teaching portfolio is a newer development and may include both summative and formative evidence. The American Association of Higher Education's definition of a teaching portfolio is "a coherent set of materials including work samples and reflective commentary on them compiled by a faculty member to inquire into and represent his or her teaching practice as related to student learning and development." Like an artist's portfolio, a teaching portfolio includes samples of the teacher's work. Sample materials might include syllabi, lectures, videotapes of teaching in action, professional development activities, feedback from students and peers, or examples of student work. An additional integral part of the teaching portfolio, though, is reflective in nature. It includes reflection on feedback, including self-reflection, and, in addition to assessment of teaching, focuses on improvement of teaching. In a teaching portfolio, one articulates an explicit statement of teaching philosophy or goals, summarizes the roles and responsibilities one has adopted as an expression of those goals, and relates teaching methods, strategies and teaching environments employed towards meeting those goals.

### The Faculty Learning Community and Teaching Portfolio as a Mentoring Model

At Broome Community College, we are exploring a model which fuses the reflective scholarship of the teaching portfolio, the efficiency of a cohort-focused faculty learning community, and the cross-disciplinary sharing of an issue-focused faculty learning community. Milton Cox (1995) proposed a department-centered approach to developing teaching portfolios as a means of increasing the importance of undergraduate education. Broome's model expands upon this idea to create a community in which a few excellent faculty veterans can effectively mentor several junior faculty members through their mutual efforts in the creation of teaching portfolios.

Selection of membership in the teaching portfolio faculty learning community is a vital step in ensuring the success of the project. For junior faculty, recruitment to the community includes the promise of assistance with the preparation of material used in the tenure and promotion process, as well as the

opportunity to receive mentoring from some of the best teachers the campus has to offer. Recruitment must, therefore, include a few carefully selected “master teachers.” Incentive for the more experienced group is often altruistic, but also carries a certain prestige at being selected.

It is important to emphasize to potential participants that a faculty learning community not “just another committee.” In contrast to most committees, a faculty learning community exists

for its members, rather than to produce a product to meet a committee’s charge. A faculty learning community membership defines its own specific activities, outcomes, and assessments. In some cases, a faculty learning committee membership might also carry some release time or improved access to professional development funding.

The benefit to colleges of supporting a faculty learning community/teaching portfolio initiative is expanding the effective mentoring by the institution’s best teachers. By encouraging faculty to work together more closely and effectively, the institution gains increased continuity and integration across the curriculum. Finally, by making use of the evidence based structure and reflective assessments of the teaching portfolio, the institution can ensure that the novice teachers of today will become the mentors for the future.

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