

## QUESTION #7:

# WHAT IS THE ROLE OF FACULTY IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND OPERATION OF LAC PROGRAMS AND SERVICES?

*A conversation with Michael F. O'Hear*

Basically, there are three types of faculty on most campuses: one, those who believe learning centers deal only with students of modest ability who take the place of more "deserving" students and who will probably fail even with help from the center; two, those who support the concept of learning centers, but have little idea of what goes on there; and three, those who are active advocates willing to help if approached at the right time in the right way. The ideal is to activate the third group, fold the second group into the third, and wear down the first. Getting faculty involved with the center has three phases: creating the climate; offering low risk opportunities, and gaining major active support for the center.

The first major element in developing faculty support and assistance is creating the climate, which involves getting the word out on the LAC, its staff, activities, and students. Frequent reports featuring programs, number and type of students served, staff achievements, and testimonials from students, create the idea that the center is active and making a difference. In the beginning stages of my program, I made

such reports monthly. Now that the program is established, reports come out twice a year. I use the school's news organ for happenings that occur between the two reports.

On a large campus, I've found that attending department meetings to explain the LAC program both serves to inform and helps to associate a human face with the program, a most important success factor. People who know who I am and what the center does will be more likely to support programs and recommend them to their students. I also use these occasions to indicate how much I value faculty input in developing programs. I offer faculty a selection of low risk possibilities for direct and indirect support. For example, I tell them that our LAC staff will be willing to come to their classes to offer specialized study skill programs and promise them feedback on referrals, if they wish it and if the students approve doing so. Many feel this is an important item because they have no other way of knowing whether the students they send to the LAC ever arrive there.

*It would seem almost impossible to get to all faculty on a large campus. How do you do this?*

Since there are so many departments on a large campus, I found it necessary to target meetings only of those which offered the best opportunity for working relationships. On my campus, this included Chemistry, English, Education, Math, Nursing, Psychology, and Sociology.

In approaching faculty, a positive attitude is essential. We know that they are concerned and that we can help them do their jobs more effectively. Even when they have off-the-wall ideas, we are willing to discuss them. Since we can't get all faculty involved in the LAC, it is a good idea to locate a small, select group whom we can get involved and who may be able to influence their departments. In doing so, notice who asks questions at department meetings, look for those whose body language

indicates interest and buttonhole individual faculty from departments visited to discuss LAC programs. From those who seem most interested, select the core group. Although all faculty may be invited to participate in LAC programs, this initial cadre is singled out for special invitations. These are people to stay in touch with constantly. This special group may be asked to publicize programs in their classes and invited to meetings with selected student groups.

To encourage greater faculty participation in LAC programs, it is important to get them into the facilities. An open house with free coffee and cookies draws certain faculty supporters to the center. Frequently these people bring friends who then gain a first exposure to the LAC.

*Earlier, you used the term "low risk opportunities." What do you mean by that?*

I always believe in starting with low risk requests in working with faculty. One simple, but potentially valuable contribution is allowing a class to be videotaped for use with students in developing notetaking skills. I have also found faculty willing to tape brief discussions of their department's introductory course content, which can be placed in the center for student reference along with a course syllabus. Provision of copies of tests for use with

students is another quick and valuable addition to LAC materials. Once faculty start using this procedure, they continue to do so. Whenever students experience problems, they are sent to the LAC for help with copies of their tests. This procedure has proven so effective in improving student grades in one department that its instructors are constantly proclaiming the LAC's success across campus.



## *Do you have an advisory board or committee for your LAC?*

Yes, we do. And, it seems to me that a higher level of commitment is required from faculty in agreeing to serve on the LAC advisory committee. If well-chosen, this group can provide valuable input and increase faculty support for the LAC. If people chosen are well-respected on campus, they can articulate LAC needs with important campus committees and with the central administration. This is particularly significant when budget issues are involved. While administrators don't necessarily listen to faculty appeals, they will be much more likely to respond to them than to requests

from the LAC director presented without active faculty support.

Even when the LAC advisory committee is mandated with membership determined by faculty vote as it is on my campus, lobbying potential candidates may influence them to run for open positions. Since my committee also has *ex officio* appointments from the math and English departments, I have found that discussing these appointments with the chairs has resulted in choices favorable to the LAC program.

## *What are some other ways to involve faculty with the LAC?*

Another way to meet and interest faculty in the LAC is service on campus committees. When faculty see LAC staff frequently in meetings, they not only put a human face to the LAC, but may begin to use the few minutes before a meeting, or the walk across campus to the meeting place, as opportunities to discuss their concerns about student success. This also gives time to tell these new friends about the LAC and to solicit their involvement in center programs.

I have found another way to involve faculty in helping the LAC while helping themselves as well. There have been times when research opportunities have allowed collaboration with junior faculty who need as much research as they can get to attain tenure. On my campus, investigations of sociology textbooks and student behaviors in developmen-

tal math have resulted in an increase of knowledge about study situations (a benefit for LAC staff) and publications/presentations that have helped the faculty members' tenure cases both in the areas of teaching and research. Such efforts solidify relationships and garner support for the LAC. A further benefit is that research presented or published with an LAC staff member's name on it increases identification of the LAC with faculty interests. The fact that I do research makes faculty mentally separate me from non-academic staff and lends a credibility to the LAC not easily obtained otherwise.

Once faculty are willing to support the LAC, Supplemental Instruction (SI) and tutoring provide special opportunities for meaningful collaboration. Although there may be some faculty who would not participate in SI, I have

not found them. SI is a great opportunity for faculty to make a difference to students and to make their own lot easier with minimal risk to themselves. Who would not want better students in class? And all the faculty member needs to do is encourage people to participate, allow the SI leader to sit in class, and provide occasional materials and feedback to the leader. Recommending tutors gives faculty added confidence in the quality of those providing services to their students. While involving fac-

ulty in tutor certification is more difficult to arrange because it requires a greater time commitment, the argument that the process benefits their students combined with positive results they've experienced will carry the day with some faculty. Limited success is all that is normally possible here because so many faculty, even supportive ones, will list extensive demands on their time as reason for non-involvement.

### *Are there some problems for the LAC when faculty get involved?*

Yes, LAC involvement in faculty development provides great opportunities, but requires some initial caution. Faculty are frequently reluctant to undergo training under non-faculty personnel. I have found two approaches that work. First is participation in the campus effective teaching group. This organization is interested in sponsoring sessions on successful instructional methods and on campus agencies that can help faculty do their jobs more effectively. This was a natural fit because a sponsored session was sure to get many faculty to a meeting where they were introduced to the LAC and its staff. In fact, we always have at least one staff member, and sometimes several, at all activities aimed at improving teaching. Our presence and participation in group sessions reinforces the idea that we are primarily interested in academic effectiveness. This in turn adds to faculty support for the LAC.

Sometimes, departments have their own effective teaching groups, which are eager for presentations meaningful to their faculty. For example, our English Department runs round table discussions for new and associate faculty. This is a great forum for introducing people from a critical department to the LAC and for soliciting their involvement in its programs.

A second effective approach has been offering the LAC facilities to faculty for running occasional class sessions. We have had faculty from business, communications, education, English, math, nursing, and psychology use our computer rooms for class sessions and for testing. Nursing works with our LAC to put an important math test on our computers and to schedule their students to take it. Chemistry and math have run study sessions in the LAC and used its computers to house important software for their introductory courses. In both



cases, students were assured that work with the software would enhance grades. In most cases, these assurances were accurate.

Success becomes the great builder of relationships and active support. We recognize faculty participation in LAC activities and trumpet their efforts to the entire campus. When they support the LAC, everyone knows.

When LAC programs succeed, everyone knows. Faculty involvement with the LAC is a win-win situation. The more faculty who experience this, the greater the level of support. No, not everyone will ever think the LAC is worthwhile or take advantage of its services, but the numbers who do so are constantly increasing.

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

Lowenstein, S. (1993). Using advisory boards for learning assistance programs. In *Perspectives on Practice in Developmental Education*. New York College Learning Skills Association.

Shaw, J. (1980). Learning centers and the faculty: Improving academic competency. In O.T. Lenning & R. Nayman (Eds.). *New roles for learning assistance. New directions for college learning assistance*, ( 2), 25-39.

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