Build It [Right] and They Will Come: Boost Attendance at Your Teaching Center by Building Community

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“Build it and they will come” is a truism that has not proved true for every teaching center. We had experienced a rather “dead” center ourselves and proceeded to make some dramatic changes that brought our center to life. Based on our experience, we urge you to make your center a community center. Using this approach, we went from a “forgotten unit” to a central, vibrant part of our campus. This article shares what we learned about how to boost attendance by creating community.

How can we make our teaching centers more successful? Diamond (1984) recommends finding out the institutional priorities as well as the criteria by which your center will be judged—and by whom—and selecting your goals and projects with these factors in mind. Nyquist (1986) suggests viewing one’s center as a service firm that meets the needs of customers, has high quality face-to-face encounters with customers, is highly visible, and systematically monitors customer satisfaction. Nemko and Simpson (1991) stress giving lots of credit to your boss, helping your boss solve problems, and working closely with faculty and with other campus leaders. Hilson and Wadsworth (2002) recommend finding out what workshops to offer through informal and formal (survey and focus groups) means and creating a coordinated series of workshops around a theme. Fideler and Sorcinelli (1992) suggest involving faculty in initiatives, providing rewards and recognition, and encouraging collegiality. Sorcinelli (2002) offers ten principles of good practice, including promoting collegiality. Ambrose (1995) provides 14 tenets to follow, including many of the tenets mentioned above.

This small body of literature has been written on how to make teaching centers successful, and some of it addresses increasing workshop attendance. However, we found no literature aimed specifically at boosting attendance by creating community. This is the gap that we aim to fill.

Our center was founded in 1980, but by 2002, it had fallen on hard times. Our president and provost decided to rethink our center from the ground up. The center was renamed the Teaching Academy and expanded from a four- to a five-person unit when a director was hired. The new director then made many changes. Almost overnight, we began offering five times as many events that generated nine times the level of participation. Now, 51% of our faculty members attend at least one event annually and the mean level of participation for all faculty members is six hours. In total we provide 7,000 hours of training to 700 participants each year—the equivalent of the contact hours in eight three-hour courses with 20 students in each course.

Participant support of the programs has also been strong. In February 2006, we conducted an online survey of 415 past or present members of the Teaching Academy – 259 responded for a response
rate of 62 percent. Eighty-nine percent of members agreed with the statement, “Based on my experiences with the Teaching Academy, I have made positive changes in my teaching.” Eighty percent agreed with the statement, “Based on my experiences with the Teaching Academy, I have observed positive changes in my students’ learning.” The comments about improved student learning included many aimed at better retention and higher exam scores:

Students seem to be more engaged. Fewer students withdraw and more students complete the course successfully.

Students have less difficulties in completing their homework, they tend to drop in lower numbers.

My students are much happier and are able to achieve more on exams and homework. They are also participating far more in the classroom.

Students seem to be more engaged. They read their texts before classes. Their performance on quizzes has improved markedly.

Increased preparation for class. Better grades on national testing.

New Mexico State University is a Carnegie research intensive, Hispanic serving, land-grant institution, with 650 full-time faculty members and 15,000 students. That makes us a unique institution, but every institution is unique in some way. Still, faculties across institutions share many commonalities: they are highly educated, they come from a variety of other institutions, and they teach a variety of disciplines. Furthermore, we believe the principles for building community are almost universal and apply to a wide variety of institutions. Therefore, in this article we want to share some of the choices we made as we built our center in hopes they will be useful as you make choices about how to build yours.

The first choice we made was guided by the task force that created us. That choice was to include “community” in our list of only three goals: supporting teaching, enhancing learning, and building community. We wanted to help solve the problem of isolation in acadeby by creating a vibrant community. To do so, we made a series of administrative and programmatic choices:

**Administration**
- Create a membership program at your center.
- Celebrate your members at an annual gala.
- Create or borrow a database (ours is available).
- Raise money from your deans.
- Raise money from your faculty, emeriti faculty, and others.

**Programming**
- Address the full range of needs of the teacher.
- Offer frequent workshops with a variety of leaders.
- Offer sustained workshops as well as one-shot workshops.
- Lead field trips to teaching institutes and conferences.
- Publicize well.

**Administration**

Create a membership program at your center. The Task Force members who founded our center stated that they didn’t mind coming to the center to learn about teaching, but they wanted “credit” for doing so. We responded by creating a membership program. Our goals were to reward participation and build community by giving participants a sense of ownership in the Teaching Academy. Memberships are earned for one year. Ten hours of attendance earns a basic membership, 20 hours earns a sustaining membership, and 40 hours earns a distinguished membership. At the end of the academic year, each member receives a report documenting their participation at all Teaching Academy events along with the encouragement to use the information to strengthen their vitas and annual reports. Similar reports are sent to each department head and dean.

Celebrate your members at an annual gala. In order for your membership program to have the maximum community-building impact, you may want to honor your members at an annual gala. Our gala includes an awards ceremony followed by a reception we call, “Champagne and Chocolate.” At the ceremony, our president and provost present awards to the most distinguished faculty and graduate student member (the members with the most hours of participation). By having the president and provost present the awards, our members – and our Teaching Academy – receive recognition at the highest level.
of the university. We also invite all the deans, department heads, sponsors, and donors as well as all our members. We give certificates to all members, branded mugs to sustaining members, and personalized awards to distinguished members. We obtain food from the hotel and restaurant department, live music from the music department, and flowers from the floral design team of the plant sciences department. Our gala is popular with faculty and graduate students. In the average year more than a hundred attend. Many participants rave about the event, calling it the “best party” on campus, which means that it is the best community-building event.

Create or borrow a database (ours is available). To start a membership program, you will need a database to keep track of who has attended which events. You will also need a database to justify your existence by showing your participation rates. Once you have a database, you can print reports for each individual, department, and college. It takes a long time to develop a database, but less time to maintain it. We will give you our database to get you started (contact Ray Leseth at leseth@nmsu.edu for a copy of our FilemakerPro™ 8.0 database).

Raise money from your deans. Is there a faculty development program you want to start but couldn’t for lack of funds? Institute the new program for “participating colleges only” and invite the dean of each college to join. Point out that faculty development is a job shared by every dean. If a given dean’s college accounts for say, 20% of the total faculty, ask them to pay for 20% of the total cost of the new program initially. We started numerous programs this way that now total $100,000 a year. Each year, we are able to raise this money in an average of 15 hours spent visiting deans. The programs we started include teaching, research, and mentoring programs. Each of these programs is collaborative to maximize community-building.

Once the programs are up and running, some colleges will exceed their expected usage. For these colleges, we switch from hypothetical pledges based on total numbers of faculty to fair share pledging based on actual usage. That is, if the dean we talked about before has 20% of the total faculty, but uses 25% of the resources of the Teaching Academy, their fair share pledge would be 25% of $100,000. Using this system allows growth in your budget over time.

To fund-raise each year, we point out that each dean’s contribution is a small fraction of the grand total cost of the Teaching Academy, which includes salaries and a modest operating budget. During fundraising, we also use our database to show deans the hours of training participated in by each person in each of their departments. Deans can see how their departments compare to each other and how their college compares to other colleges. The net result is that the deans see the impact the Teaching Academy is having on their faculty and pay their fair share with a minimum of grumbling. The strategy has a strong campus-wide impact with a low cost to us in time spent fund-raising. Using this strategy, we raise almost twice as much as our operating budget each year. (We also raise money from the Provost, the Vice Provost of Research, the Vice Provost of Distance Education, the Vice President of Student Success, and two NSF grants: ADVANCE and AGEP. For simplicity here, we have focused on the deans.) We also gain buy-in from the deans who will support programs and encourage participation because they have a vested interest.

Raise money from your faculty, emeriti faculty, and others. A first step to any fund-raising program is to think through and identify constituencies to approach for support. We chose to target members, especially those who have attained a certain level of participation (distinguished and sustaining members). In addition, we have sought to identify emeriti faculty, retired teachers, and others in the community with an interest in education and teaching. Lastly, we are working to identify private foundations, especially family foundations and corporate foundations, with a concern for educational issues.

We find that fund-raising is a good way to get grassroots buy-in to the center and raise awareness about the center across a broad spectrum of different communities, much as a museum or a public radio station would. For our annual giving, we have three levels. Each level has two different amounts associated with it: one that is on-going and tied to payroll deduction and another that is a larger one-time gift. Payroll deduction has proved especially effective, because it makes giving affordable over time. One-time gifts are larger because they are not ongoing and we want to encourage people to make ongoing gifts. Backers give $5 a month or $100 outright. Builders give $25 a month or $500 outright. Founders give $50 a month or $1,000 outright. After three years of using this system, we have 13 founders, 11 builders, and 59 backers for a total of $18,000 per year of
income and much more buy-in than we had before.

To raise money for the annual fund, we approach our members several times a year. We point out that our center offers an exceptional benefit to faculty and staff and we offer an opportunity for them to give back and grow the center for others. We make an understated pitch each year at the annual awards ceremony. In the fall, we send a four-color fund-raising newsletter to all members of the university community and a fund-raising letter to all members of the Teaching Academy. In the spring, we do another fundraising letter to members, asking them if they would like their name “on the wall” of donors at the gala. We also do follow-up visits to especially likely givers. We talk to our 30-member board about the importance of giving at each semi-annual meeting. We point out that the proportion of our board that contributes is important because we are asked about it on every request we make to a private foundation.

One of the challenges for any new fund-raising effort is the need to develop a compelling case for donor support. There are many philanthropic needs on campus and beyond. We have worked hard to explain how our teaching center benefits the very broadest segment of campus. For example, we have followed Texas A & M’s advice and said that “giving a student a scholarship helps one student at a time. Giving a teacher a scholarship helps a generation of students over the course of a teaching career.” We have written a formal “Case for Support” that documents the successes of the Teaching Academy in terms of the number of faculty served (800), number of hours of professional development given per year (7,000), as well as our strength as the most advanced teaching center in the state, in terms of number of full-time staff (5). The case for support also details giving opportunities and needs, such as naming opportunities, endowment opportunities, and miscellaneous smaller needs (teaching materials, scholarships for faculty and staff to attend national conferences, and support to bring nationally recognized teachers to campus.)

We also raise money, mostly from large university donors, for our endowment. For this, we hired a development officer quarter-time. We might have been able to manage the annual fund (not nearly as well) without him, but we never could have started this initiative because we have no contact with big university donors. In contrast, our development officer works with them every day in his other role as a planned giving officer for the university. He invites several such donors, as well as a few committed members of the Teaching Academy, to “Friends Luncheons” three times a year. At these lunches, we tell a little bit about the Teaching Academy and take a tour of the Academy. To date we have received a planned gift of about $200,000 for our endowment.

**Programming**

*Address the full range of needs of the teacher.*

Put the teacher first, even if you are billed as an instructional design center. If the best teachers do not survive in the system, it will negatively impact instructional design. So start with the teacher, and address their full range of needs, including “deal-breaker” issues like time management, publishing, writing grants, and negotiating the promotion and tenure process. Some of these topics will attract audience members who would not otherwise come to your center, and some of them will come back for teaching-related workshops. Faculty and graduate assistants will greatly appreciate your attention to these issues and will thank you for it.

To help faculty negotiate the promotion and tenure process, we co-host a half-day long series of speakers and panels on the process of negotiating tenure. Topics range from “Negotiating the Tenure Process” to “Putting Your P&T Packet Together.” We also keep a set of successful P & T packets on file in our center’s library for candidates to look at year round and the skeleton version of some of them is available online as well (http://www.teaching.nmsu.edu/tenure.htm).

To address time management, every two years we bring in Meggin McIntosh, the Productivity Professor™. Although we bring in a half dozen speakers a year, Meggin draws crowds as big (70) and ratings as high (6.7 on a 7.0 scale) as any speaker. We recommend that you bring her in (meggin@meggin.com) or do something else to seriously address time management on your campus.

To address the publishing issue in two ways. Every two years, Tara Gray does a workshop entitled, *Publish and Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar.* The workshop is aimed at helping faculty write daily for 15-30 minutes, organize paragraphs around key or topic sentences, and get help from a variety of others. These workshops continue to draw 70 participants and to receive high ratings (6.6 on a 7.0 scale). See www.taragray.com or Gray (2005) or...
Gray and Birch (2000) for more information. Each semester and summer, we also offer writing groups that almost any faculty developer could lead with a little thought (see Gray, 2005, pp. 97–111). These writing groups are a wonderful way to build community and help faculty get feedback on their writing from an interdisciplinary group. They are also important because they attract participants who would not otherwise come to your center—and some of them will come back for teaching-related workshops.

Offer frequent workshops with a variety of workshop leaders. Have something for everyone. Keep the campus in the workshop habit. On a big campus, it’s hard to overdo it. On our campus with 650 full-time faculty, for example, we find that twice a week during the school year is about right. Provide so many workshops that you can’t help hitting the topic of choice for everyone occasionally. Host a variety of workshop leaders that extend well beyond your center staff. Include faculty and staff from your own campus among your presenters. It’s a good way to get their buy-in to the center and to extend your offerings. Bring in external speakers. We talked about raising money from others to host programs. It is also relatively easy to raise money to host speakers. Consider hosting an external series of speakers as a way to attract funds and participants to your center.

Offer sustained workshops as well as one-shot workshops. Offer workshops that meet many times over the course of the semester, whether these are structured as formal learning communities or as short courses. Provide opportunities for faculty to come together in a setting that builds community and enhances learning far beyond the one-shot workshop (Lewis, 1997; Miller, 1995). We offer four semester-long short courses annually, and many others on an occasional basis. We offer ten sections of the four short courses to maximize enrollment in the courses. We offer: Publish and Flourish and Writing Groups as discussed already; Peer Coaching: Teachers Helping Teachers (Gray & Meyer, 1997); and, Team Mentoring for New Faculty (Gray and Birch, in progress).

Lead field trips to teaching institutes and conferences. Leading field trips to teaching institutes and conferences is another way to provide opportunities for faculty to build community and to learn more than they would in a one-shot workshop. We lead two field trips per year. In June, we go to a weeklong teaching institute in Leadville, Colorado, Boot Camp for Profs. In August, we fly to the three-day Distance Learning Conference in Madison, Wisconsin. To ensure that each trip offers the full benefits of community, we advertise the events as “field trip style” and require community transportation and housing.

Publicize well. People must come – and come regularly – to your center in order for it to be a community center. So take publicity seriously and make sure your announcements are among the best-looking on campus (Holton 2002). Don’t rely solely on e-mail to advertise your events (Holton 2002). To the contrary, use a big flyer to advertise your whole slate of offerings once, at the beginning of every semester. Then advertise them again, one by one. Have a graphic artist or a student of graphic art make all your flyers from a template. It may be less expensive than you think. On our campus, it would cost $500 to have a graphic design student produce 30 flyers from a template. But it costs only $50–$100 to have the student produce a template for each semester’s flyers and give you the template. The template includes a banner across the top with your logo and perhaps the semester of origin and a place at the bottom for the sponsors. Then, you can fill in the rest of the content for each flyer. Having your flyers made from a template ensures that your flyers are branded—and it is clear they are coming from your center. Then, each flyer can be a different color to differentiate one event from another.

Conclusion

When it comes to teaching centers, if you build it they may or may not come. Although campuses and centers differ, there are some ways to build a teaching center that are more likely to lead to a vibrant center. Almost overnight, our center went from being a “forgotten unit” to being a central, vibrant part of our campus. Although every campus is different, faculties across campuses share important commonalities, and the principles for building community are almost universal and apply in a wide variety of institutions. Therefore, we urge you to make your center a community center. If you would like to read more about the NMSU Teaching Academy, we invite you to visit our website, http://www.teaching.nmsu.edu. Every center is a work in progress and is busy growing or dying every day. Build it [right] and they will come.
References


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