What is a Faculty and Professional Learning Community?[1]

The work of Alexander Meiklejohn (1932) and John Dewey (1933) in the 1920s and ‘30s gave rise to the concept of a student learning community. Increasing specialization and fragmentation in higher education caused Meiklejohn to call for a community of study and a unity and coherence of curriculum across disciplines. Dewey advocated learning that was active, student centered, and involved shared inquiry. A combination of these approaches in the late 1970s and '80s produced a pedagogy and structure that has led, among other things, to students' increased grade point averages, retention, and intellectual development. The term *learning communities* traditionally has been applied to programs that involve first- and second-year undergraduates, along with faculty who design the curriculum and teach the courses.

A *faculty learning community* (FLC) is a group of trans-disciplinary faculty, graduate students and professional staff group of size 6-15 or more (8 to 12 is the recommended size) engaging in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, transdisciplinarity, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and community building. A participant in an FLC may select a focus course or project to try out innovations, assess resulting student learning, and prepare a course or project mini-portfolio to show the results; engage in triweekly seminars and some retreats; work with student associates; and present project results to the campus and at national conferences. Evidence shows that FLCs increase faculty interest in teaching and learning and provide safety and support for faculty to investigate, attempt, assess, and adopt new (to them) methods. In the literature about student learning communities, the word "student" usually can be replaced by "faculty" and still make the same point, for example, "Learning community students generally fare better academically, socially, and personally than those in comparison groups."

There are two types of faculty learning communities: *cohort-based* and *topic-based*.

Cohort-based learning communities address the teaching, learning, and developmental needs of an important cohort of faculty or staff that has been particularly affected by the isolation, fragmentation, stress, neglect, or chilly climate in the academy. The curriculum of such a yearlong community is shaped by the participants to include a broad range of teaching and learning areas and topics of interest to them. These communities will make a positive impact on the culture of the institution over the years if given multi-year support. Four examples of cohort-based communities are those for junior faculty, for mid-career and senior faculty, for Preparing Future Faculty (graduate students), and for department chairs.

Each topic-based learning community designs a curriculum to address a special campus or divisional teaching and learning need, issue, or opportunity. Faculty and professional staff members may propose topics to the FLC program director, who then advertises a call for applications across the institution. These FLCs offer membership to and provide opportunities for learning across all faculty ranks and cohorts, plus graduate students and appropriate professional staff. They focus on a specific theme. A particular topic-based

[1] http://www.units.muohio.edu/flc/whatis.php

faculty learning community may end when the campus-wide teaching opportunity or issue of concern has been satisfactorily explored and addressed. As examples, see descriptions for Miami FLCs.

Faculty learning communities are more structured and intensive than most approaches that gather together a collection of faculty to meet and work on teaching and learning issues, for example, teaching circles (Quinlan, 1996), book clubs, seminars, courses, or a group coming together over "brown bag" lunches to read and discuss articles on teaching. Of course, with the addition of certain components such as community, scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching—these groups may be FLCs. Research teams have long been disciplinary groups that work together on discovery scholarship, but they may proceed without an emphasis on community. Multidisciplinarity and community make FLCs work in teaching and learning pursuits.

Faculty learning communities are different from but in many ways like most action learning sets in that they both are "a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done" (McGill & Beaty, 2001, p. 11). Both faculty learning communities and action learning sets are more than just seminar series, formal committees, project teams, or support, self-development, or counseling groups. FLCs and action learning sets have several aspects in common: Both meet for a period of at least 6 months; have voluntary membership; meet at a designated time and in an environment conducive to learning; treat individual projects in the same way; employ the Kolb (1986) experiential learning cycle; develop empathy among members; operate by consensus, not majority; develop their own culture, openness, and trust; engage complex problems; energize and empower participants; have the potential of transforming institutions into learning organizations; and are holistic in approach.

Faculty learning communities differ from action learning sets in that the communities are less formal; for example, they do not focus extensively on negotiated timing or other formal structures at meetings. Faculty learning communities, while including the efficiency of getting things done, have more focus on the social aspects of building community: Off-campus retreats and conferences include times for fun, and a dinner or gathering during the year may include spouses or partners. Faculty learning communities include more emphasis on the team aspect (while still consulting about and developing each individual's project) and on the ultimate beneficiaries of the program: the students in the participants' courses and those participating as student associates of the FLC (Cox & Sorenson, 1999).

An FLC is a special kind of "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998).