

A Certificate in College Teaching

Ed.'s note: Faculty continue to teach without much in the way of preparation to do so. Most learn to teach by doing it, sometimes supported by a small credit seminar in graduate school or workshop activities offered on campuses or at professional meetings. Would faculty do better if they had more in-depth opportunities to explore instructional issues? Undoubtedly, but how might those be structured so that faculty are motivated to participate and institutions recognize the value of faculty efforts expended to develop themselves as teachers? What follows is a description of an interesting model with promising possibilities. It is an opportunity currently open to any interested faculty member, and the features that make this program so successful could be replicated elsewhere. Information contained in this article comes from the website that describes the program (find its address in the article) and an interview I conducted with the two administrators in charge of it.

Born out of a national grant project, Preparing Future Faculty, and an informal agreement between two institutions outside of Boston, a Certificate in College Teaching is now formally offered by the Colleges of Worcester Consortium. The Consortium, an organization that affiliates 13 public and private colleges and universities in central Massachusetts, describes the certificate program as “a collaborative institutional response to the ever-present challenges of promoting exemplary teaching in today’s complex higher education markets.” Seed money to fund this certificate program came from the University of New Hampshire as a result of UNH’s participation in the Preparing Future Faculty grant project. However, this certificate is unique because a consortium of institutions, rather than a single research university, sponsors it.

Here’s how the Certificate in College Teaching works. “Students” who are graduate students, full-time faculty members, new appointees, adjuncts or part-time teachers take six credits worth of coursework that includes a foundational two-

credit course, Seminar in College Teaching. Students also take three one-credit electives that focus on certain pedagogical topics such as teaching with technology, designing and teaching online courses, legal issues in teaching, and teaching in a specific discipline (foreign languages, engineering or psychology, for example). To complete requirements for the certificate, students take a one-credit practicum during which they engage in a mentored teaching experience and prepare a comprehensive teaching portfolio.

The program allows students a great degree of flexibility. With the exception of the practicum, designed as a capstone experience, students may take courses in any order and may take individual courses even if they do not intend to complete the certificate. The courses themselves carry bona fide graduate credit through Consortium member Clark University. Courses are scheduled throughout the year, including summer, and some are offered in online formats.

Faculty who teach in the certificate program are recruited from Consortium institutions as well as from outside. They are paid to teach the courses and may receive an additional stipend to support their course development efforts. Certificate program coordinators (Dr. Susan Wyckoff, the Consortium’s vice president for academic affairs, and Dr. Judith Miller, associate dean for special academic initiatives at Clark University) emphasize that faculty are expected to “model the methods” of course development, teaching and assessment proposed in the courses. So, for example, when information and advice on leading a discussion are offered, faculty do not lecture; they “discuss” the topic.

Those enrolling in the courses do pay tuition, although institutions in the Consortium often underwrite this cost. Adjunct faculty are most likely to pay for the coursework themselves and then use the certificate to buttress teaching experience on their resumes. Some Consortium institutions “highly recommend” that new

faculty participate in the program either in the summer prior to their first year at the institution or sometime during their first three years of college teaching.

The Consortium’s website (www.cowc.org under “faculty resources”) contains a great deal of information about the certificate program, including detailed course descriptions, complete syllabi and an impressive collection of endorsements from program participants. Not only is this an interesting model for institutions and collections of institutions interested in providing substantive professional development experiences for faculty, but this certificate and individual courses are also open to faculty outside the Colleges of Worcester Consortium. The website contains information on enrolling and tuition prices, and includes a course schedule that indicates which courses are offered online. It also explains the procedures for faculty who might be interested in developing and/or teaching a course in the program.

Dr. Miller has been involved with the program since its very early and informal beginnings. Both Dr. Miller and Dr. Wyckoff have overseen its transition from its inception in 2002 to a formal program now offered by and in part supported by the Consortium. As it has evolved, the program has grown significantly in size and complexity. Through the process, they have learned much, including the importance of starting out with a clear set of learning outcomes for the whole program as well as individual courses. They have faced the challenge of designing a program that has curricular coherence at the same time it offers faculty the flexibility to take from the program what they need—which may not be the certificate. Both are happy to answer additional questions about the program and share in more detail what they have learned. They may be contacted electronically: Dr. Wyckoff at swyckoff@cowc.org and Dr. Miller at JudMiller@clarku.edu. 🍓