

**A Report to the Center for the Advancement of Teaching at
Xavier University of Louisiana
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Introduction

This is a report on our visit to Xavier University of Louisiana on July 7-8, 2004 to evaluate the assessment plan of the University's Center for the Advancement of Teaching (CAT) and to consult with the Center's strategic planning committee. Dr. Todd Stanislav, Director of the Center, provided us with excellent background information via the Center's web site prior to our arrival, set up a schedule which made it possible for us to meet with all of the "key players" related to the Center, and oversaw all of the logistical details of our visit, maximizing the amount of time we had to devote to the goals of the consultancy. During our visit, we met with the seven members of the Center's faculty and staff, the seven members of the Center's Strategic Planning and Implementation Group (SPIG), President Norman Francis, Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Deidre Labat, Senior Vice President for Resource Development Gene D'Amour, and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs Elizabeth Barron.

Background

The Center was created after the University received a technology and faculty development grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation in the early 1990s (the University received its first grant support for faculty development in the late 1980s from The Bush Foundation). Other initiatives and grants followed from the AAHE Peer Review of Teaching Project, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (which funded, among other initiatives, a project to enhance the use of multimedia in representations of the sacred and secular in religious studies), and the Bush-Hewlett Foundations.

Technology continues to play an important role in the work of the Center. For example, Center staff members supervise two student/faculty computer labs and two electronic classrooms and the Center also supports a handful of technology initiatives (e.g., Technology Infusion Projects Initiative, Rich Media Projects Initiative, Technology-Enhanced Curriculum Initiative). The administrators (president, senior academic vice president, and associate vice president for academic affairs) who played key roles in developing the structure of and support for the Center continue to perceive its work in instructional technology very positively and consider this to be one of the cornerstones of its programming.

Governance and oversight of the Center is highly faculty-driven. Todd Stanislav coordinates a CAT advisory group of 40-50 faculty members who agree to serve for two years each and respond to ad hoc requests for assistance (reviewing faculty proposals, for instance). Dr. Stanislav reports to AVP Elizabeth Barron (who was appointed as the first director of the Center and helped write the initial grant to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation), but both Dr. Barron and Dr. Labat have chosen a "hands off" approach to management of the Center. Day-to-day decisions – as well as long-range planning – have been left to Center staff and faculty members.

Evaluation of the Center's Assessment Plan

We were asked to respond to four questions related to the Center's assessment plan:

- To what extent is the Center successful in evaluating its work?
- What is the Center doing well (in relationship to assessment and evaluation)?
- What needs to be improved? What is missing?
- How efficiently is the evaluation work being conducted?

Based on our observations, we arrived at the following conclusions:

Successes in evaluating the work of the Center

Center staff members have collected a large amount of survey data that suggest that the work of the Center is perceived quite positively and that a large proportion of the Xavier faculty have participated in Center activities. Those who have participated in the programs coordinated by the Center provide very positive evaluations of their experiences.

On the other hand, the Center has not attempted to collect systematically data that would demonstrate a direct link between faculty development activities and student learning. We encouraged Center staff to consider to what extent they can demonstrate that participation in their faculty development activities makes a positive impact on the learning outcomes of Xavier students. While studies that use these direct measures are difficult to design and conduct, they are likely to provide important information to supplement the survey data. Even the collection of self-reported data by faculty that is suggestive of success in this area would be helpful. Data collection and design could be built on instruments from the extensive evaluation the Center already conducts. Dr. Stanislav and Dr. David Lanoue have identified several examples already. Specifically, these include:

1. Faculty participation survey
2. Faculty electronic classroom survey
3. Student electronic classroom survey
4. Technology-enhanced curriculum student survey
5. Faculty-designed assessments of student learning associated with individual projects (see under "Project Evaluation": <http://cat.xula.edu/rfp/2002/10/communities>; <http://cat.xula.edu/rfp/2002/10/tip>; <http://cat.xula.edu/rfp/2004/08/communities>; and <http://cat.xula.edu/rfp/2004/08/tip>)

Specific successes in the design/collection of assessment data

We identified at least two assessment/evaluation activities that have been highly effective. First, a large amount of well-designed survey data have been collected and analyzed. The data collection process that includes online assessment and aggregation works very effectively. There is also excellent support for course or project-based assessment that includes multimedia components. Many faculty development centers could benefit from data collection efforts that lead to data of this quality.

Improvements needed/components missing

While the Center is guided by a clearly articulated philosophy in its mission statement, we were unable to identify a clear statement of objectives for the Center and the way in which

those objectives support the mission of the University. While we are well aware that the Center is at the beginning of its strategic planning process (and that the SPIG has been planning on identifying objectives this semester), it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of a program without a clear understanding of what is trying to be accomplished. When consensus has been reached regarding objectives as part of the strategic planning process, key performance or critical indicators can be identified to help determine the extent to which the objectives are being achieved. This should lead to a better understanding of the “big picture” outcomes of the Center’s activities and is likely to include some assessment of the relationship between these activities and their impact on student learning.

Extent to which Center activities are being performed efficiently

The Center staff members are clearly committed to their work, individually and as a team. Consideration is being given to adding a “teaching-learning specialist” to the staff. While a short list of responsibilities has been identified in the proposal for this position (see <http://cat.xula.edu/about/advisory/specialist.pdf>), we would recommend that this person have the specific skills required to help assess the impact of the Center’s activities on student learning and to work effectively with those who are charged with assessing student learning outcomes for the University as a whole.

Strategic Planning Process

We were also asked to respond to four questions related to the Center’s strategic planning process and timetable:

- What is being done well?
- What needs to be improved? What is missing?
- How efficiently is the work being done?

Successes in strategic planning

The Center has organized an effective Strategic Planning and Implementation Group (SPIG) that includes representation from Center staff, a member of the academic administration, and faculty members who are not part of the Center staff. Some members of the group have had extensive experience with strategic planning efforts in other venues. Based on our observations, this group has the energy, enthusiasm, and willingness to ask critical questions that are required for an effective strategic planning process.

Possible improvements and missing components

One of the next steps in the strategic planning process should be the development of a statement of goals and objectives based upon a clarification of values for the Center. After Center objectives have been identified, the SWOT process can begin (identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), and this should help to establish priorities among the objectives. During this process, attempts should be made to encourage participation from throughout the Xavier community, including the Center for Undergraduate Research. (We noted that the CUR had just appointed a new director at the beginning of June and that Dr. Stanislav had already arranged a meeting with her to try to identify common programming goals.) For the faculty, this might be done through the annual Fall Faculty Institute or by engaging the Center’s advisory committee. If it is not possible for senior administrators to participate in the SWOT process, they should be kept fully informed of

the process through regular meetings with Center leadership. It is important to appoint an excellent facilitator for the SWOT process. While there may be a member of the Xavier faculty or staff who has this expertise, we would recommend seeking the assistance of someone from off-campus to facilitate this process. As part of the SWOT process, additional efforts should be made to analyze and synthesize the extensive amount of survey data that the Center has collected.

Efficiency of the strategic planning process

As noted above, the Strategic Planning group seems to have the energy, enthusiasm, experience, and expertise that are required for an effective strategic planning process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Center for the Advancement of Teaching at Xavier University has a rich history of enhancing faculty development at the University. With its current leadership and staff, the Center has collected excellent survey data related to its perceived effectiveness. It will be important to add measures of the impact of the Center activities on student learning outcomes at the University. This assessment of student learning could probably be conducted in collaboration with the University's assessment program. While Dr. Stanislav has assembled an effective team for the strategic planning process, it will be important in the near future to:

Clarify the objectives of the Center

Specifically, we recommended that SPIG members begin with the values statement embedded in the Center's mission and turn those into goals and objectives. For instance, the statement that "the Center...values assessment as a means to improving teaching, student learning, and the work of the Center" could be rearticulated to state that the Center will work with faculty to identify better ways of using diverse assessment tools to enhance their teaching, work with students to be more actively engaged in evaluating their own learning, and provide efficient and effective means of gathering data from faculty on the effectiveness of the Center's programming.

Get broad faculty participation in the strategic planning process

We encouraged Dr. Stanislav and the Strategic Planning and Implementation Group to consider recruiting some members of the Center's advisory committee to focus specifically on assessment of teaching and learning and to use the Faculty Institute structure more intentionally to inform SPIG's decision making. (Dr. Stanislav indicated that SPIG intends to share a draft of the Center's new mission, program, and values statements with the faculty as a whole at the Fall Faculty Institute.) Other means – such as campus-wide electronic updates – might be used throughout the coming year to keep faculty informed and to encourage an investment in contributing to the strategic planning process.

Encourage administrative input and the Center's participation in University initiatives

While the Center will, at minimum, need to keep the administration informed of the outcomes of the strategic planning process, we believe that there are opportunities for the Center to become more visible in the University's strategic direction. While administrators were uniformly supportive of the Center – describing it as a place "where faculty can go for help" and a "supportive, non-judgmental environment" – they did not perceive a direct

connection between the work of the Center and improved student learning. Some of the University's upcoming directions and initiatives – focusing on undergraduate research, leading the education of young scientists of color, and building the capacity of the faculty – would be very compatible with the overall goals of the Center and may open doors to additional sources of funding. Something as simple as occasional presentations at regular administrative meetings may help to raise the profile of the Center and facilitate an ongoing conversation between administrators and Center staff on the connection between faculty development and student learning outcomes.