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Growing a Faculty Writing Group on a Traditionally Teaching-Focused Campus: A Model for Faculty Development

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The University of Findlay

When expectations for scholarly productivity increase at comprehensive universities, faculty writing groups can provide the tools, motivation, and support necessary to achieve both administrative and faculty goals. Narratives from members of a faculty writing group experiencing a shift in institutional expectations for scholarship reveal tangible and intangible benefits gained through weekly meetings with colleagues from different disciplines and varying career stages and provide support for establishing a culture of scholarship. Faculty development centers housing writing groups, like the one modeled in this essay, provide momentum for productivity by cultivating readiness, preparation, and production of scholarship.

In 2006, Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, and Beach conducted a study of five hundred directors of teaching and learning centers, senior administrators, faculty and deans to determine emerging needs in faculty development programs and services. The survey revealed that a key challenge in faculty development that persists at institutions of all stripes is the need for faculty to find the right combination of research, teaching, and service to achieve tenure and promotion. In an age when tenure lines are often cut rather than replaced or replaced with adjuncts, establishing this balance of tenure requirements is necessary for new faculty to succeed. Yet failure to complete scholarly projects is a primary reason for tenure or promotion rejection. Affecting new and old faculty alike, difficulty with starting or completing writing projects is cited as one of the major roadblocks to a faculty member achieving tenure according to a 2008 *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay on the increasing need for job coaches and writing support. A key piece for faculty development in this area is how to help faculty find time to write when many comprehensive universities specifically have raised the stakes.

Like many other comprehensive universities that traditionally have focused primarily on teaching, UX has broadened its requirements to include a balance of teaching and research for tenure and promotion. A study by Perry, Clifton, Menec, Struthers, and Menges (2000) notes that comprehensive universities tend to cultivate faculty members who are less productive researchers (primarily

due to a larger emphasis on teaching) but that other factors such as scholarship support can positively boost faculty productivity when these habits become part of the culture. Research-intensive universities have historically offered faculty support such as sabbatical leaves for research and writing. Faculty writing groups offer a space where faculty can share work and get feedback, set writing goals, and generally be held accountable for their progress. These groups tend to exist in a variety of locations such as a university writing center (Michigan State University), offices of Faculty Development (Emory University), and occasionally Centers for Excellence in Teaching (Georgia Southern University).

While several resources describe benefits of faculty writing groups (FWGs) (Cramer, 2006; Friend & González, 2009), discipline-specific faculty writing groups and graduate writing groups for future faculty (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008), scant literature exists on the usefulness of FWGs in the context of transitioning faculty to a culture of scholarship and supporting faculty scholarship initiatives at comprehensive universities. In response, our essay is a snapshot of how faculty development centers (and the writing groups they host) can initiate and sustain these endeavors and offers suggestions for developing Faculty Writing Groups (FWGs).

In recognition that faculty are required to do much more than teach, our own campus began coordinating faculty writing groups in 2007 as a means of a culture

that values scholarship. Housed in the campus Center for Teaching Excellence at The University of X (UX), faculty writing groups are open to any faculty member seeking help to get started, revise, or finish writing projects ranging from articles and presentations to books, performance pieces, and campus documents such as course descriptions and tenure narratives. These programs are popular with faculty and well established as indicated by the fact that even new faculty know about them, they are recommended by the Vice President of Academic Affairs during yearly meetings for tenure track faculty, and they are well-attended. Specifically on our campus, the initial goal of faculty writing groups is to help professors navigate the emerging culture of scholarship, establish research agendas, connect with professional resources such as library databases and grants, and find motivation and productive habits for writing.

Factors such as scholarship support, including a campus climate that values research efforts, can positively boost faculty productivity. UX publicly committed to raising the profile of research on campus, and new tenure requirements acknowledging these new priorities were voted on and approved by faculty senate. One of these new requirements was a "scholarship" section that required proof of four peer-reviewed publications/presentations (in any combination) within six years.

Mirroring the structure of Faculty Learning Communities (Cox, 2000), writing groups seemed to be a logical first step to support both tenured faculty seeking promotion who had not published (or not published frequently) as well as new faculty coping with a high teaching load combined with publication pressures for tenure that previously did not exist. It was important that faculty writing groups are presented as a support, versus a remedial, group. Otherwise the temptation for administrators might be to "send" faculty to the faculty writing group to "fix" a scant publication record. When groups are issued as supportive, faculty participants have the motivation to attend, but not the fear of embarrassment if they don't.

We make the case here that faculty writing groups housed within centers for teaching and learning at comprehensive universities offer a non-threatening and small-scale tool for administrators to interest faculty in emerging cultures of scholarship. Based on our analysis of our own group's activities, a variety of positive outcomes are possible, both intended and unintended.

Evolution of the Writing Group

When the FWG began on this campus in 2007, the FWG facilitator, a faculty member whose workload responsibilities included initiating and managing faculty development programs, promoted the program and invited all faculty members to attend sessions at two

alternate times. In recent years, meeting times are set by the facilitator based on availability of faculty who attend regularly, but all are invited to attend. The first call yielded two groups. Group size and composition varied. One group grew to 15 members with faculty from Science, Business, and Liberal Arts. A core of five members from this group met regularly. The alternate group, composed of faculty from the Liberal Arts, enjoyed the intimacy of 6-7 members and met consistently every two weeks.

The facilitator begins each semester by asking group members to share individual goals and discussing activities and processes so that each member understands the level of commitment. Weekly meetings commence with the same routine of sharing individual productivity and establishing weekly goals. Because faculty members join the group to find support and accountability, this activity addresses those needs. Other activities include distribution of informative handouts (by the facilitator on a topic relevant to group needs), charting writing time, and exchanging written work for peer reviews. A few times each semester the group will meet at another location, like the president's home, to review work or hear a speaker, but the weekly activities of sharing goals, scheduling writing time, receiving handouts, and reviewing work have become routine.

The facilitator and, at times, group members share reading sources. Several semesters group members followed Belcher's (2009) *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks* as the format for weekly activity. The facilitator shared tips from her experiences on finding a journal home, turning a power point into a paper, and developing works representing scholarship of teaching and learning. To combat worries about time, the facilitator spent several sessions on time management tips, using resources such as Robert Boice's *Advice for New Faculty Members* (2000) and tips from other faculty from *Chronicle of Higher Education* forums.

When FWGs began, 6% of the faculty joined. With the influx of tenure seeking faculty and new hires at our institution, 9.1% of faculty members participated in FWGs. The number of members who attend all or most of the meetings has increased from 60% to 83%. A number of things may contribute to this increase among which are cohesiveness due to shared goals, affirmation of even small achievements, faculty development resources that include weekly feedback, and accountability for productivity. The percentage of those who drop out after the first few sessions has decreased from 20% to 5% and most of them do so because of schedule changes that conflict with the FWG meeting time.

The optimal group size depends on the needs, structure, and meeting space for the group. Chidambaram and Tung (2005) argued that as group size increases, individual participation decreases even though overall productivity

may increase and claimed the ideal size was four to eight members. We found having 6-12 members with a range of disciplines provided more energy and alternative perspectives for peer reviews. Weeks when group size increased, initial goal sharing time was longer, however, peer review time was not compromised due to the fact that each member exchanged with another individual.

To support this faculty development endeavor, the university offers one release each semester for the facilitator (as part of a package of other scholarship enhancing duties). The facilitator assumes the duties of scheduling a meeting time based on availability of committed members and reserving a dedicated space.

Although assessment of FWG contributions has not been formalized, attendance and publication reports account for group member activity, and successful tenure and promotion awards reflect its benefits.

Method

Narratives below were taken from one group's responses to survey questions. Direct quotes used were representative of and consistent with member responses. During their review, authors coded responses as the categories below emerged. Although the authors were the only respondents to this survey, the narratives yielded a perspective from the early stages of the group about the processes, motivations, and outcomes.

Outcomes

As we present this snapshot, we first frame it with the outcomes both intended and unintended, that this faculty writing group produced. As noted above, the institutional goal in general and the facilitator's goal in particular were an overall increase in faculty submissions of written work as well as a cultural shift to a commitment to scholarship. In addition to meeting these outcomes, assessment of our group, based on the anecdotal evidence provided below, produced seven unintended outcomes: decreased isolation; respect for colleague's work; sense of community; collaboration between senior and junior faculty; knowledge about research outside of respective disciplines; enthusiasm for scholarship; and, sustained activity. In other words, the "photograph" of our faculty writing group developed as we had hoped, but upon great scrutiny, the image also contained richness we had not expected when we initially formed the group hoping only to produce more writing. These same benefits are often found as a result of other faculty development activities as highlighted by Tara Gray in *Publish & Flourish* (2010).

To provide a variety of perspectives on how the writing group strengthens a fledgling culture of scholarship at a comprehensive university, we offer narratives

from our group that reveal in-depth "conversation" about perceptions, roles, benefits, and challenges. Throughout these points of discussion, threads of the intended and unintended outcomes emerge.

Perceptions Prior to and After the Establishment of the Faculty Writing Group

Many centers for teaching and learning vary in focus and title. In its inception, our Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center served as a center for technology support in teaching endeavors; versus a professional resource as these comments indicate. The following members' perception changed when their use of the center for technology training shifted to a meeting place for collaboration.

Jane: I guess I may have thought of it as just a place to go if you needed to update your computer training and skills, particularly if you were teaching online. The Center became a space for development and reinforced the cultural values of scholarly productivity and collaboration.

Nora recalls previous use of the center for technology training:

Nora: Prior to coming to the FWG [Faculty Writing Group] I had attended many sessions at the CTE to learn more about using technology for course management and continue to gain ideas about preparing the dossier. At one meeting, recent recipients of tenure or promotion supplied their dossiers for us to peruse then offered suggestions about planning activities that would help us meet the requirements. These experiences lead me to believe that the center is more about collaboration than training.

These perceptual changes illustrate a transformation in the view of a campus resource not only from an individual standpoint, but also from a faculty culture standpoint. In particular, Nora's comment about the center as a site for collaboration and building relationships rather than a location for systematic and perhaps impersonal training lays a foundation for the enhanced sense of community among scholars that developed as an unforeseen consequence of the writing group.

Facilitator's Role in Building Cohesion within Faculty Writing Group

Guiding and organizing these groups was a facilitator who played multiple roles in the group. One role was to build a cohesive and committed group. By all accounts, we argue a facilitator of the writing group from a center for teaching and learning is necessary to provide support in three key areas: *logistics* (meeting date, time, place, agenda), *motivation* (deadlines, calendars, setting writing

goals), and *campus connections* (putting writers in contact with the appropriate tools and campus offices to help writers navigate human subjects questions, technology tools for research such as survey and interview tools, and links to other bodies on campus). Bea served as the facilitator for our group and addressed these three areas. Jane valued the motivation and structure the facilitator provided.

Jane: It is very helpful to know that one person is going to schedule the meeting, remind us of the meeting, and provide some structure. Moreover, the facilitator provides other resources for writing like schedule sheet and, even more significantly, outside speakers to continue to motivate us to make time for scholarship.

The credibility of a facilitator with a publishing record instills trust among the members and for Louann was "necessary".

Louann: I *do* think a facilitator is necessary at least at the beginning stages of building a solid faculty writing group. Someone is needed to set and remind others of deadlines and to keep the group organized and running smoothly. I do think that it helps if the facilitator has established his or her ethos with solid prior publications (as is the case with our facilitator).

By extension, a facilitator already engaged in scholarship only heightened our group's commitment to scholarship. Her infectious enthusiasm led other members of the group to respond in kind, both with increased writing and with interest in reading others' scholarship and to make time for the scholarly activity that necessarily preceded the meetings. Writing centers could also benefit from the expertise and sustained publications of local writers or editors to inspire and advise.

Perceived Benefits of the Faculty Writing Group

While a tangible benefit has been an increase in documents produced, a more intangible benefit is that the group has led to members building in time for scholarship despite a heavy teaching schedule. This can particularly be true of senior faculty who have already achieved tenure and their desired rank. As Baldwin (1990) notes, the vitality of faculty members is a function of the career development process that is also present within the professoriate: "Some faculty members remain professionally active and vital to the end of their careers. Others seem to plateau long before retirement and become less innovative and less productive" (p. 161). For some this plateau persists, whereas for other faculty, new career goals and tasks can end this stagnation (Baldwin, 1990). This routine of meeting with a group promoted sustained writing habits

which resulted in more submissions and publication as these comments illustrate:

Bo: By reviewing each other's written efforts, and by setting clear timetables for myself relative to the publication effort, I have become more focused and more productive. As a result, I am currently revising a manuscript accepted for publication.

While Bo benefited from group imposed deadlines, Jane benefited from regular meetings that facilitated her continuous work on long term projects:

Jane: Prior to joining the group, I had published articles and book reviews in my field, but for the last few years my scholarship has focused on peer-reviewed scholarly presentations at regional and state conferences. Presentations have a more concrete time frame: they are scheduled for certain dates, so you know when you can stop working on it. Still, I wanted to return to publishing and make time for it, and the group seemed a great way to make that transition.

In terms of tangible benefits, since joining the faculty writing group last fall, Jane has published an article on which the group gave her initial feedback. She has submitted a second article, and received editorial comments for revision. Bo received approval for a book chapter he had been working on.

Another unintended and intangible benefit from the faculty writing group, one that perhaps is more expected, as it is often a natural outcome of collaborations is camaraderie or social capital. Nora found this to be an especially motivating factor:

Nora: The writing group helped me get to know other faculty members and gain inspiration from them.

Shared knowledge defines a group of people and forms the basis for community. The knowledge gained through exchanges within the group is enriching as indicated by Bo.

Bo: In a very short period of time, the Writer's Group became the highlight of my week. Isolated by the academy (as many of us are), this group propelled me into a whole new world of ideas OUTSIDE of my own narrow discipline.

Bo's experience encapsulates what the rest of us in the group discovered: a lessening of the isolation often commensurate with scholarly activity. We found that, rather than laboring alone, admittedly a necessary element to the writing and research process, many faculty members in our FWGs embrace and prefer moments of connection resulting in new awareness and respect for scholarship and knowledge outside our own immediate

fields of expertise. Whereas we might have interacted only at university meetings, our meeting as a designated faculty writing group heightened our appreciation for each other as scholars, the part of our professional lives that is often less visible to others, than our teaching or university service contributions.

There is growing evidence that a scholarly culture at UX is emerging based on faculty writing groups. University promotional materials highlight faculty scholarship with greater frequency. Faculty members collaborate on research with colleagues within and outside their discipline. The fact that members of FWGs comprise the majority of those who have been asked to discuss research and publications in Brown Bag lunches and in other venues in the university demonstrates ways FWGs contribute to this growth.

Logistical Challenges

While forming a community of scholars from different disciplines had the advantages noted below, it did contribute to logistical challenges. Our group felt that reading work from a variety of disciplines sometimes was problematic due to lack of background knowledge. However, a lack of knowledge about each other's subject matter sometimes was an asset, for it allowed members to appreciate other kinds of scholarship:

Louann: One element that can be a challenge but not necessarily a problem is reading a text from another discipline. Sometimes I'm not sure if a term/concept is unclear to me because I'm not in the discipline or if it's unclear because the writing is unclear. These instances just give cause for discussion.

While it may be challenging to read works from another discipline, due to the progressive nature of many works, an added benefit is that members become familiar with works in other disciplines and support sustained activity. Nora discovered:

Nora: We were asked to keep our submissions to three pages and read them when we arrived. With these impromptu readings or works from other disciplines, I learned to frame feedback as questions that would prompt the author to consider other perspectives.

Moreover, critiquing a colleague's work, while challenging, builds a sense of collaboration and community:

Jane: These discussions give me the opportunity to learn more about my colleagues' fields and interests, and thus, by extension, feel that I know them, or this aspect of their professional life, a little bit better. Then, this feeds into the external motivation benefits of the group.

Assessment

At the end of the year, in her role as facilitator, Bea compiled data from both faculty writing groups and compared productivity rates (measured as articles and conference abstracts submitted as both groups were primarily working on these types of writing projects) between both groups and between the groups and non-participating faculty. Our faculty writing group had a higher rate of productivity, roughly 10% more articles and conference presentations submitted than non-participating faculty. The other FWG produced 2% more than faculty not in a writing group. Our comments here suggest that there is a direct link between the faculty writing groups and increased writing project completion and productivity. Active participation in a faculty writing group implies commitment. The accountability FWGs produce is one motivator for members to allocate writing time as Jane suggests.

Jane: Let's face it. We're scholars and we're writers. We can and have written in isolation. With all of demands of our profession, it is very easy to push scholarship to the back burner and say, "well, this other project needs to come first" and eventually days turn into weeks. If I know, however, that Louann, Facilitator, Nora, and Bo, all of whom are in the same situation, are making time to write and are expecting to see something that I've worked on. As a result, I have forced myself to carve out time to actively write and research and anticipate submitting two articles by the end of the year [as noted earlier, this goal was met].

Furthermore, subjecting one's work to a FWG raises the expectations for quality as indicated by Louann.

Louann: Sometimes what seems obvious to me in my writing is less so to my group members; furthermore, I see the standards of my group members and I strive to bring my work to that level.

Bo: As I reflect upon the remainder of my career at UX, I have firmly decided that I have a voice and that I have the hubris to believe that I have something to say to the larger world. This Writing Group has empowered me to embark more rigorously on that path.

Why Some Groups Work and Others Don't

Group size can impact productivity (Chidambaram & Tung, 2006) and cohesiveness (Lowry, Roberts, Romano, Cheney, & Hightower, 2006) of a faculty writing group. As size increases, the amount of contributions per member decreases, members perceive themselves as anonymous and generate ideas less frequently (Lowery et al.). Our facilitator meets with two faculty writing groups at UX, our group and another group. While both groups meet

regularly and have roughly the same number of members, our group is more cohesive and productive for reasons we discuss below:

First, competition and commitment influence the cohesiveness and productivity of group members:

Louann: I'm not sure I would want to add more members at this time. It takes time to build cohesion and trust. Plus, I know the current members are committed. I think we feed off that.

Second, group size can affect productivity.

Bea: The other group is not, I would argue, as productive or successful as this one for a variety of reasons such as competitive faculty members (some of whom try to "dominate" sessions with discussions of their own scholarship).

Third, a group climate that is safe and collegial affects productivity, particularly in the uncertain culture of the comprehensive university.

Jane: It sounds like the key difference is that in our group there's no sense that anyone has to "prove" him- or herself to anyone, which eliminates the potential of "fear" – fear of being found lacking, fear of being thought an inadequate scholar, etc.

Finally, the perception that joining a FWG would be more time consuming than writing alone keep many from joining. When the culture shifts, members in writing groups will most likely make the transition.

Nora: Many may not be motivated to produce scholarship because they do not perceive a relationship between scholarship and enhancing student learning. The FWG demonstrated that they are related.

Our group was able to develop a sense of community and collaboration because all group members took the group seriously and signaled that the group and its scholarly endeavors were a priority through the above behaviors. Our smaller group size enabled a dynamic of trust to develop in group. Comments given by colleagues were given thoughtfully because there was an openness to receiving these comments and comments were received willingly because they were given with sincerity and concern for the writer.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Based on our discussion above, it is clear that offering faculty writing groups provides a bridge between the traditional emphasis on teaching and emerging culture of scholarship at our university. During this transitional period, it is clear that rates of scholarly productivity

scholarship can be increased due to pressure to achieve the new tenure guidelines met. However, as our group responses attest, faculty must also believe that scholarship is a worthy endeavor in and of itself and that for some such efforts serve to improve teaching as well.

Beyond increasing awareness and use of services at CTE, our experiences suggest faculty writing groups also enhance the productivity of faculty on campus at different stages in their academic careers. Examples include Bo, a senior faculty member, who has been able to complete several writing tasks within the support and framework of the group, whereas Nora, in a very different stage – one going up for mid-tenure review – has also drawn support from the group for writing projects as a way of participating more fully in the UX community. While administrators may be tempted to measure productivity only in terms of articles published, there are many steps prior to publication: the faculty member's sense of productivity and motivation to continue on the publication/scholarship/research path is the initial measure of this type of success. By sponsoring FWGs, Centers for Teaching Excellence can often serve as a catalyst for increased faculty productivity, help broaden the definition of scholarship, and educate senior academics administrators about the usefulness of such initiatives. Housing faculty writing groups at these centers also lends structure to the "hidden" time faculty spend writing (or not writing) in their offices. Glenn (2009) offers one example of a faculty member who put up an embarrassing picture on Facebook until his book edits were complete. While some faculty may choose to use a negative motivator to increase scholarly productivity, faculty writing groups are recognized as a successful positive motivational tool that actually works when conducted successfully.

More importantly, perhaps, is what the awareness of the CTE and support for faculty at various stages in their career creates at the university: an intellectual community of scholars that need not be divided or defined based on traditional boundaries or labels such as "tenured," "associate professor," and the like. Instead, the CTE, through the support of faculty writing groups, can develop a sense of community and a space to share the communal activity of engaging in scholarship and conversing about scholarly endeavors.

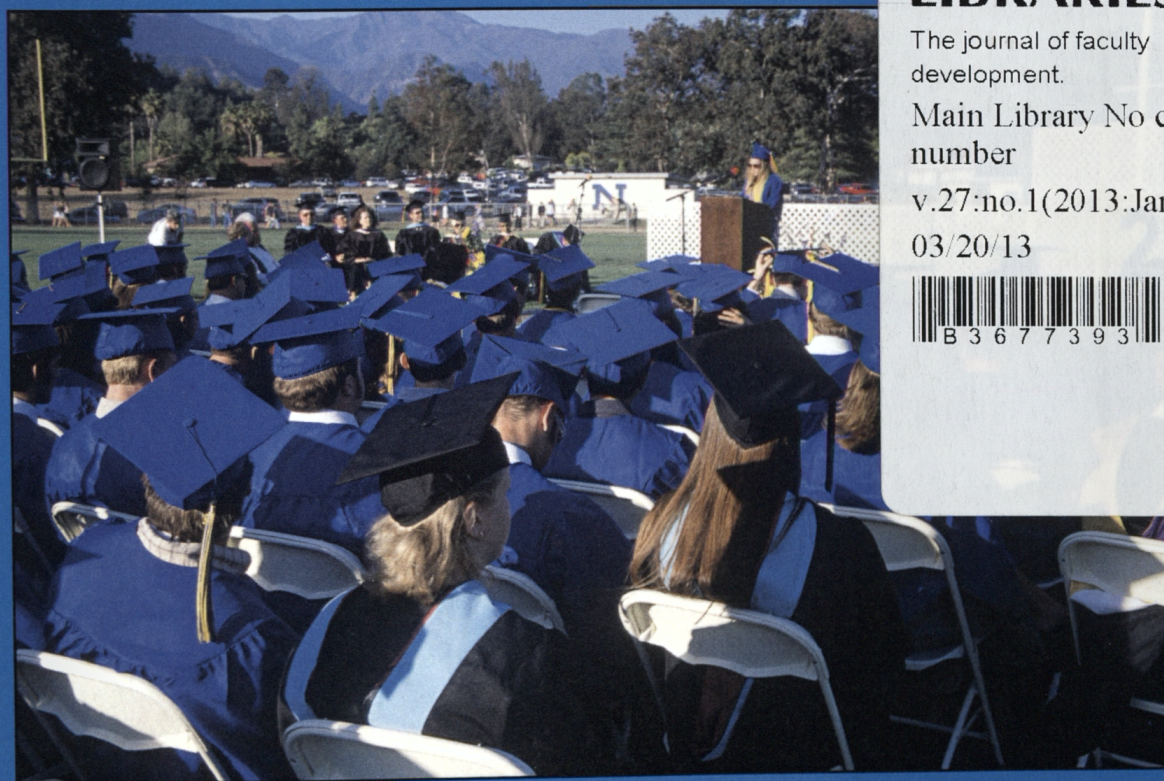
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The Journal of Faculty Development, founded in 1983, is an independent, peer-reviewed journal published by New Forums Press. Issued three times each year, the *Journal* is a medium for the exchange of information regarding professional development in post-secondary educational institutions. We publish a wide variety of articles, ranging from research studies (using qualitative or quantitative methodologies) to essays on theory and philosophy. Our readership includes faculty members, administrators, and faculty development professionals at all levels of higher education, therefore we encourage contributors to focus on the implications of their investigations for scholars and practitioners in the field. We have published manuscripts related to issues in professional development, higher education pedagogy, curriculum, leadership, program design and implementation, and evaluation and assessment. We welcome suggestions for thematic issues of the *Journal* – addressing a single issue, problem, or theory.

Addition of Student Centered Learning Content. With this issue, the *Journal* incorporates content, and actively seeks submissions, related to Student Centered Learning. The editors and publisher wish to encourage college and university faculty in the search for ways to achieve a focus on learning that is student centered versus teacher centered. What differentiates this emphasis from others is its focus on students as active and involved learners versus focusing on teachers and teaching styles. Teachers who embrace student centered learning (SCL) encourage students to:

- take responsibility for their own learning,
- involve students directly in the discovery of knowledge,
- use materials that challenge students to use their prior knowledge to create new and deeper understandings of concepts,
- embrace the concept that learning is enhanced through social activities such as cooperative learning, problem based learning, etc.,
- use school, work, home, and community as resources for collaborative learning,
- involve all constituents in contributing to student learning (faculty, students, staff, alumni, employers, family, and others),
- use activities beyond the classroom to enhance the learning experience.

Specific learning approaches that have strong student centered components are Cooperative Learning, Collaborative Learning, Learning Communities, Problem Based Learning, Project Based Learning, Service Learning, Case Method, Peer Based Learning, Paired or Grouped Courses, Adult Learning, Experiential Learning, Constructivist Learning, to name a few. We are interested in identifying authors who wish to contribute to the literature on student centered learning and provide information that will be helpful to teachers and administrators interested in adopting student centered learning approaches in their courses and institutions.

Submission of manuscripts dealing, but not limited to, the following areas are sought.

- Practical applications of student centered learning paradigms,
- Case studies showing successful student centered learning approaches,
- How to implement student centered learning approaches.

The *Journal* supports the efforts of the following organizations:

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