
Teaching Improvement: Exploring the “Hidden” Resources Available in Your Department, College, or Campus—A University of Florida Example

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Abstract

Increased emphasis and changing expectations toward improving instruction in Colleges in Agriculture have led to a renewed interest in teaching excellence. This article examines numerous factors and forces which are contributing to this renewed interest in teaching and learning. It concludes with a discussion of the development of a Teaching Resource Center (TRC) within the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Florida. The TRC serves many functions, such as, program development to support the instructional process, individual faculty consultation, information dissemination and support of participation in regional and national workshops on teaching improvement. The TRC represents a replicable model for enhancing instruction in Colleges of Agriculture.

Introduction

There is increased emphasis and interest on the part of faculty and administrators in Colleges of Agriculture toward improving instruction. Perhaps there are many reasons for this. Clearly the expectations of performance for faculty are changing (Boyer, 1990). Not only are faculty expected to be experts in scientific inquiry and involved in significant service activities related to solving public problems, there are greater expectations for excellence in classroom and laboratory teaching. A common concern of some is that faculty responsibilities are not clearly communicated, especially as they relate to teaching. Latshaw (1995) proposed that such responsibilities not be left to chance.

Most doctoral programs do an excellent job of preparing individuals entering the academy to conduct research and link their results to practical problems influencing the general population. With the exception of graduate teaching assistantships, most faculty have had little or no practical experience in developing and delivering instruction (Davis & Beyrouty, 1995).

In a report by the National Research Council (1992), H.O. Kunkel revealed that beginning faculty need systematic nurturing during their induction. Experienced faculty also have

the need to stay abreast of new methodologies and delivery systems.

The purpose of this article is to reflect upon this changing expectation regarding excellence in teaching, discuss resources which have been traditionally available to assist faculty who are interested in instructional improvement, and to put forward suggestions that faculty should consider when developing and implementing strategic plans for instructional improvement.

Changing Expectations for Teaching Excellence

Many forces have contributed to the growing national interest in teaching improvement. For example, student demographics, especially in Colleges of Agriculture are changing (Maxie, 1989). Students often enter our classrooms with high expectations of being engaged in the learning process. Faculty unprepared to treat their students as active participants in the learning process are unable to satisfy the learning needs of their students.

Technological trends have impacted the instructional process and student expectations. This is not to say that our students today enter our programs with a “Game Boy” mentality. However, they are more inclined to respond positively to problem solving instruction where they are responsible for seeking information from multiple sources including the World Wide Web in an effort to develop plausible solutions to complex problems. Schuh (1993) notes that a challenge for land grant college faculty is acquiring the skills for modern communication and media technology in the instructional arena. He predicts that technological obsolescence in instructional delivery systems will continue to be an increasing challenge in academia.

Competition for limited resources will continue to challenge decision makers when funds are allocated. Public expectations for quality instruction, especially at the undergraduate level will increase expectations for teaching excellence. Funding decisions for programs will increasingly be based upon student credit hours and enrollment (Connor, 1993). As a result, the development and delivery of university-wide service courses will influence the curricular decision-making process.

Finally, empirical advances in the body of knowledge regarding the teaching/learning process (Broder, 1994) have an influence on teaching expectations. The complex socio-

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logical and psychological web associated with teaching and learning in higher education is being slowly untangled. Researchers at various institutions across the country are adding much to what we know about instruction in Colleges of Agriculture.

Traditional Resources for Instructional Improvement

Although institutional centers for teaching improvement are common on most campuses, concerns have been expressed regarding their mission and roles. Historically, many instructional improvement centers have targeted primarily graduate teaching assistants in equipping them with survival skills in college classrooms. Other centers provide technological support and workshops on various computer platforms and software programs. When workshops or classes that focus on teaching and learning in the classroom or laboratory are offered for faculty, it is not unusual to hear complaints regarding the lack of practical application. Faculty are practical creatures by nature. They also have very full schedules. Programs designed to improve instruction must have immediate application possibilities and be scheduled at times convenient for faculty attendance.

Teaching Resource Center Model

Although institutional centers for teaching improvement can offer support, it is often an overlooked resource by its own faculty. Certainly in the broad discipline of agriculture there are opportunities for professional improvement. Through organizations such as NACTA, faculty in Colleges of Agriculture have the opportunity to learn about new developments in teaching by way of this journal, meeting face-to-face during the annual conference and engaging in dialogue about technologies and methodologies, and recognize exemplary teachers on a national basis. Specific disciplinary professional organizations are also emphasizing teaching improvement. For instance, the American Society of Agronomy has developed a journal specifically dedicated to teaching (*Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education*).

Within our own institutions, we commonly recognize outstanding teachers and academic advisors. What is often lacking is faculty initiative to take the leadership in developing and implementing a strategic plan for teaching improvement at the College level.

At the University of Florida, a number of activities are underway regarding teaching improvement. Accountability is the issue in the minds of legislators, students and the general public. This has focused attention on academic programs, enrollment figures and effective teaching. Within the statewide university system, effective teaching is being promoted and rewarded through a monetary incentive (\$5000.00) to the base salary of exemplary teachers. The current promotion and tenure policy adopted by the faculty in the College of Agriculture at the University of Florida requires that two peer teaching evaluations be a component in a teaching port-

folio which will be included in the promotion and tenure packet. The combination of these factors resulted in the need for a systematic process for professional development activities related to effective teaching.

As a result, funding was established for the development of the Teaching Resource Center (TRC) housed within the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication. Four primary objectives of the TRC include: (1) program development to support the instructional process; (2) individual faculty consultation; (3) information dissemination; and (4) support of participation in regional and national workshops on teaching improvement. These activities are coordinated in collaboration with the College's Academic Development Committee and the University Center for Excellence in Teaching (our institutional teaching improvement center).

Program development consists of sponsoring activities to improve college teaching based upon predefined needs. A variety of program formats (brown bag luncheons, departmental seminars, distinguished lectures, and college-wide workshops) have been initiated and others are in the planning stage. Program topics range from teaching at higher cognitive levels, teaching diverse audiences, multimedia in the university classroom, peer evaluation, academic advising, and development of instructional and course related materials.

The TRC also provides one-on-one consultation to faculty requesting assistance. The consultation involves videotaping instruction, classroom observations, and/or evaluation of course materials. If deficiencies are identified, an individual improvement plan is developed. Another objective of the TRC is to serve as a facilitator for state-of-the-art information on teaching and learning. A resource library with reading areas, conference room, multimedia work stations and other resources related to teaching are available for faculty use.

To date, the TRC has conducted a number of programs designed to enhance teaching. For example, a one-half day workshop was presented on Peer Evaluation to approximately 60 faculty members. Additionally, two presentations were made at a Distance Education workshop. Seminars have been delivered to several departments in the college and a half-day workshop on Evaluation and Testing has been delivered. College faculty have been very receptive to these activities.

Conclusion and Implications

Increasingly academic programs are being held accountable for their actions, outputs and use of public funds. Perhaps it is time to be pro-active. Connor (1993) noted that legislators tend to value academic programs more in difficult times and that viable teaching programs will continue to fare better in the future.

A faculty development agenda can be as ambitious as your faculty can envision. Resources for a teaching resource center are critical for success. However, perhaps more important is administrative support and recognition of the need for professional development activities by faculty. Emphasis on quality instruction will continue to rise, will we be ready to deliver?

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INSTRUCTIONAL MEDIA

REVIEWS

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Principles of Turfgrass Management

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Principles of Turfgrass Management is an independent study course on turfgrass management. The material was designed to prepare individuals to become a certified turfgrass professional. The course is divided into the following chapters.

Turfgrass Growth, Development, and Physiology; Turfgrass Characterization, Identification, and Adaptation; Soils; Establishment; Fertilization; Mowing; Irrigation; Weeds; Insects; Turfgrass Diseases; Pesticides; Turfgrass and the Environment; turfgrass Troubleshooting; and Customer Relations.

Review Summary

The course material was rated excellent in every respect. The reviewers comments included: very comprehensive, well organized, well illustrated, quality material, and clarity. One reviewer stated, "The introduction does a good job of setting the stage for learning and motivating the student. The graph below describes the average rating of the reviewers.

Summary Remarks

Content Panel Member

The introduction does an excellent job of reassuring adult learners that they are in charge and that learning material for certification does not need to be intimidating. The organization and clarity of the material are outstanding.

I appreciated the care given to provide feedback opportunities to the student. The objectives at the beginning of the chapters and the review questions with accompanying answers provide opportunities for immediate feedback. Mail back exams are included after chapters 3, 7, 10, and 14. These multiple choice exams are an excellent method of instilling confidence in the student and providing a sense of accomplishment during the course. The exams are sent to the Georgia Center for scoring.

The answers are returned with a score. However these scores are for feedback only and do not count for or against certification or a course grade. This provides an opportunity for intermediate feedback and provides a sense of confidence for the two monitored exams.

To borrow from the movie critics—I give this material an enthusiastic two thumbs up rating!

Tom Schumacher
Professor, South Dakota State University

Content Panel Member

One of the best practical correspondence courses I've seen. I believe adding media (videos or slides) would really enhance the course.

Douglas Pals
Professor, University of Idaho

General Panel Member

The media reviewed was a packet of material designed to serve as course study materials for a correspondence course in turfgrass management offered through the University of Georgia. It includes four mail back exams (with scan-tron sheets) that allow students to monitor their progress. These exams are not counted toward certification, but assist students in preparing for the monitored exams of the same multiple choice format. It is well-written and organized and does an excellent job covering most topics that would be taught in an introductory turfgrass management course.

Robert A. Lane
Professor, Sam Houston State University

Availability

The Principles of Turfgrass Management course is available by calling 1-800-542-8097 or 1-706-542-1756.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Picture Quality		X		
Sound Quality	X			
Editing	X			
Content	X			
Currentness	X			
Organization	X			
Accuracy	X			
Vocabulary	X			
Interest		X		
Technical Quality	X			
Overall (Average of Reviewers)	X			