

Encouraging Capital Improvements In Educational Activities

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The concept of capital investment in making long-term, durable improvements in the educational infrastructure of a department is introduced. These educational improvement projects would be on par with research projects, and the faculty member could follow multiple tracks of scholarly activity that are of equivalent value to the mission of a college and university. Project evaluation methods are proposed, along with the subsequent need for tangible and countable credit being applied to a teacher's own long-term, written account of professional activities. Such an environment encourages on-going educational improvement projects which ultimately benefit students.

Introduction

The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) is a comprehensive project administered by the U.S. Department of Education in cooperation with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). The general objective of the project is to improve teaching effectiveness in those departments, from all colleges, participating in the project.

Whaley and Wickler offer supporting evidence on the need for teaching improvement based on faculty perceptions. At UNL, each participating department has a leadership team that develops a FIPSE plan reflecting the departmental environment including subject matter variables, faculty values, and the teaching mission. Many of the plans focus on gathering data to measure either input to the teaching activity or outcomes from it, or both. The causal path assumes that significant input to teaching will result in improved teaching, or at least sustain it at an already high level of effectiveness. In some cases, the significant input already exists but is not being sufficiently measured to reward faculty. Newcomb argues that documentation of most professors' teaching is so poor that it is hard to reward. Most of the plans are designed for application to existing, on-going teaching activities that center on the teacher-learner discourse within the classroom. Baker and Meyers offer an example of video taping a teacher to evaluate technique and style.

The plan presented here takes a broader approach, and is based on two fundamental concepts that treat the faculty member as a professional engaged in teaching. The first concept is one of capital investment in education, and the second concept is the familiar notion of peer review.

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Capital Investment

The FIPSE Plan for the Department of Agricultural Economics, UNL, is based on the concept of capital investment as it applies to making long-term, durable improvements in the educational infrastructure of the department. Examples of capital investment projects include:

- a new, interdisciplinary course on "Ethics in Agriculture";
- an agricultural marketing course that utilizes satellite and telecommunication technology to serve distant learning needs;
- a computer simulation-game for use in an advanced agribusiness management course;
- curriculum renewal;
- a formal self-improvement program on teaching effectiveness;
- an internship program;
- a new graduate course with reference materials and assignments that draw from contemporary research on the subject;
- a seminar program for graduate students to experientially develop skills in teaching and oral presentations;
- a credible and useful method for feedback on a course and its teacher;
- integrating undergraduate and graduate education with extension and delivery experiences;

An explicit distinction also needs to be made between capital projects as listed above and maintenance activity. The latter involves the making of regular adjustments and incremental improvements in existing educational activities. Examples include updating classroom lecture materials; making adjustments in delivery mechanics; and responding to peer or student feedback on suggestions for course improvements.

Capital projects require a faculty person to champion the educational improvement, and invest considerable time and effort in accomplishing the task. For this reason, the faculty person would be self-selecting in choosing to initiate a project, and would be responsible for articulating the project details to both peers and the administration.

Multiple Tracks

The concept of capital investment in education would lead to a professional environment where educational improvement projects are on par with research projects. Acceptance of the concept would be explicit recognition that a faculty member's career can follow multiple tracks of scholarly activity. The one well known track is research,

which has a long-run institutional history based on experiment station projects and professional publications.

Another track, which is being proposed here and is less institutionalized than the research track, involves doing capital projects that both improve the educational experiences of students and further develops the teacher's ability to deliver those educational experiences. In the education track it is possible to apply the same processes as in research by proposing a formal project; seeking peer and administrative review of the proposal; and gaining acceptance along with resource support. Executing on the project would involve literature searches; program development; testing and evaluation; and making adjustments to yield the best results. The project would come to closure by formally reporting outcomes to college peers; by presenting results at professional meetings; or by publishing in peer reviewed outlets. Boyer (pp. 38-39) quotes an example from a distinguished chemistry professor where, "a faculty member's commitment to and insight about good teaching are evaluated through journals," and that "articles about teaching should be peer reviewed and given weight for tenure and promotion." A professor could pursue a professional career in either an education track, or a research track, or both.

Evaluation Concepts

Allowing a faculty member to follow multiple tracks of scholarly activity would lead peers and administrators to explicitly recognize that each of the tracks are of *equivalent* merit in contributing to the mission of a college and university. This explicit recognition of equivalent merit counters the perception of teaching as a residual activity in an environment where research and journal output are preeminently valued. Therefore, critical to the success of the capital investment concept being proposed is the establishment of an evaluation method consistent with other scholarly and academic activities. Some preliminary notions are presented to stimulate thinking.

In the professional environment of academia, a faculty member carries with them a long-term, written account that details professional activities and publications. Periodically these accounts must be revealed to peers for purposes of decisions about career advancement, nomination for awards, introductions when speaking, and job changes. One proposed notion is to post to the faculty members account a tangible credit comparable to the one that has long been recognized in research. The tangible credit would be a Journal Article Equivalent (JAE), which would be on par with a referred article produced by research. Journal articles are both tangible and countable credits in a faculty member's account, and articles are perceived as being important evidence of scholarly activity. An example of applying this valuation method would be that if a faculty member had a new course accepted, then the long-term account would be credited with say 2 JAE's in recognition of the capital improvement and scholarly achievement.

Another notion for evaluation is that of identifying activities which earn hard currency as compared to soft currency. After being in a departmental unit for a relatively

short period of time, faculty members develop their own perceptions about activities that earn "hard currency" and others that only earn "soft currency." Despite assurances from department heads, deans, and even peers that educational activities do really earn hard currency, a faculty member may discount those assurances as a hedge against accumulating only soft currency in their account. It is no secret that research output, namely in the form of referred publications, is perceived as a hard currency. Again, signals from nearly everyone in academia reinforces this perception, perhaps to a fault. The challenge to a department and college is to make sure capital projects for educational improvement would earn hard currency, just as research output does in its own track.

Peer Review

Presenting results of educational improvement projects at professional meetings, or publishing in peer reviewed outlets, already conform to the institutionalized accounting of scholarly activity. The above two notions of project valuation are conceptual ones to stimulate thinking, but they also recognize current institutional realities confronting educational improvement efforts. These conceptual notions of evaluation leave considerable latitude for an individual department to develop its own more specific steps in the evaluation process. Recognizing that each department has unique cultural, social, political and economic characteristics, the following process is proposed in moving from the conceptual notions to specific steps for implementation. Consistent with the research track of scholarly activity, the evaluation process depends on peer review. The general steps are as follows:

1. The department's undergraduate or graduate committee, depending on project focus, would have oversight responsibility. It would appoint two faculty members to manage a double blind peer review of the project once it is completed.
2. The review managers would choose three faculty outside the department, including some from outside the state, to formally review the project description and results.
3. The reviewers would be asked to evaluate: a) the creative component of the project, and b) the improvement or gains that were achieved.
4. The reviewers anonymous comments would be returned to the project leader for possible response and clarification in writing.
5. Based on the reviewers comments and the project leaders' responses, the review managers would then make a yes or no decision on the question, "Does the project make a significant contribution to educational improvement?"
6. If yes, the review manager's findings would be reported to the appropriate oversight committee. The committee would then determine an appropriate type and amount of tangible credit (like JAE) to be assigned to the project leader's permanent record.

Some departments, because of size or desire for a more expeditious process, may find the above steps too slow and

deliberate for their needs. Another process, based on the reporting requirements for agricultural experiment station projects, would involve the following steps:

1. Submit a project proposal and have it accepted.
2. Provide written reports of periodic progress.
3. Give a final written report on project outcomes.

The oversight committee or department head would then decide if the project made a significant contribution, and on the credit to be recorded in the project leader's permanent record.

Teacher Motivation

While these two evaluation methods may seem unusual, the intent is to emphasize that faculty motivation for long-term, durable education improvements come from peer recognition and real rewards to the professor. In order to sustain faculty belief in multiple tracks of scholarly activity another necessary condition must be met. The evaluation and reward for educational improvements cannot be transitory. Instead, there must be over an extended period of time with explicit, visible actions by peers and administrators that recognize the contributions of a professor's capital projects. Such visible actions include nominating and supporting a person for teaching awards at college, state and national levels; salary increases and possibly bonuses; promotion in rank; and tenure.

All of the previous discussion focuses on the input factors in educational development. Inputs such as the professor as a professional; the length of time for a project; an evaluation method for the professor's efforts; and the incentives for project success. Given all these inputs, the most important aspects of such a plan are the outcomes for the participants. The expected outcomes of this FIPSE plan are:

- students have continued access to progressive, stimulating educational experiences;
- faculty are receptive and enthusiastic about educational development;
- an on-going process exists for long-term improvements in the educational infrastructure;
- positive awareness by citizens and peer institutions of a progressive commitment to student education.

Summary

Many programs aimed at improving teaching effectiveness focus on existing, on-going teaching activities that center on the teacher-learner discourse within the classroom. These programs gather data to measure either input to the teaching activity or outcomes from it, or both. The plan given here encourages capital investment in making long-term, durable improvements in the educational infrastructure. The motivation for the teacher comes from a project evaluation method that treats a capital project in education equivalent to a research activity. When a project is completed, then tangible and countable credit is applied to the teacher's long-term, written account that details professional activities and publications. On-going, long-term improvements are encouraged by this plan, and the ultimate beneficiaries are the students.

Bonding With Freshmen

Wm. W. Ellis

Abstract

Generally, beginning college freshmen fear the unknown and seek peer support and understanding. Additionally, most freshmen benefit from faculty who understand their new situation and help them make the transition to the college community -- this could be called bonding. This proven technique of faculty bonding with freshmen is frequently used in transition or orientation type courses. This technique can also be very beneficial to freshmen majoring in Agriculture. Discussion will feature the benefits of personal student letters, personal appointments, phone lists, writing assignments, group learning activities, visits to professor's home and the use of peer teachers. The benefits of freshmen bonding are higher student retention in the course and higher academic performance by freshmen in their courses.

Introduction

Effectively teaching the college freshmen requires many skills other than a vast knowledge of an academic discipline. One of these vital skills is the ability to bond with freshman. Bonding is a long term process and requires many different approaches and techniques. Bonding, for this manuscript, would be defined as mentoring freshmen for the purpose of making their entry into the college community less of a risk. If faculty are eager to bond with freshmen, the stress of adapting to the challenges of the freshman year can be alleviated greatly.

Methods

Initially, faculty should be eager to share their personal history. Students have an interest in hometown, colleges attended, college leadership roles, career employment and family. This should be followed by having the students share their personal histories. During this activity, faculty

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