Preparing Future Agricultural Sciences Faculty: An Evaluation of a Cohort Program



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Program Purpose

Teaching at the university level is a challenge for all who embark upon it. The goal of this program is to help doctoral students become better prepared for a career in academia through the development of contemporary research skills along with sound teaching practices.

- ❖ Program Participants: observe university teaching faculty, practice teaching skills, and gain knowledge of faculty experiences and expectations while developing a philosophy, methodology, and individual teaching goals.
- ❖ The program format provides students with extensive time to investigate teaching and student advising techniques, learn from experienced faculty, and develop their own student centered teaching practices.

Theoretical Framework

- ❖ Institutions, students and parents are expecting an increase in teaching ability in higher-education (Austin, 2003) and the job market is defined by both the demands of teaching and research (Austin, 2002).
- ❖ Communities of Practice (CoP) are the reification of the theories of social structure, theories of identity and theories of situated experience in the context of social theory of learning (Wenger 1998). CoPs are groups of individuals with differing levels of expertise engaging with each other to improve their skills. They share a domain, a common practice, and community (Wenger, 1998).

Methodology

Interviews and focus-groups were conducted with current program participants (n=5), program alumni (n=5), faculty mentors (n=4*), and administrators (n=5*). The asterisk represents a duplicate. Transcripts were line-by-line open coded. Codes, analytical memos and field notes were then used to develop themes. Triangulation was created by collecting data from three populations. Inter-relator reliability was utilized in the final-theme development (Creswell, 2013).

Program Overview

Year 1

- Students participate in course observations and discussion sessions
- Completion of both Fall & Spring GTS Courses
- Weekly meetings with mentors
- Graduate school GTA workshop offered in August
- Completion of Teaching Practices in Agriculture and Life Sciences course

Year 2

- Team Teach a course with mentor
- Completion of both Fall & Spring GTS Course
- Weekly meetings with mentors
- Variety of assignments designed to grow participants as instructors
- Complete one of the Future Professoriate courses
- Conduct a research project on an aspect of teaching and learning
- Complete 1 2 professional development activities each semester

Year 3

- Teach Assigned Course as lead instructor
- Completion of both Fall
 & Spring GTS Course
- Weekly meetings with mentors
- Complete remaining Future Professoriate courses
- Complete 1 2
 professional
 development activities
 each semester
- Submit a Scholarly Work based on research on teaching and learning

Faculty Mentors

•Guidance and support for assigned course through planning and teaching process.

Results

Theme 1. Participants Perceptions and Experiences of the Components of the Program

All components were recognized as valuable for learning, emphasized lead teaching.

Theme 2. Recruitment & Finding Successful Scholars

Not appropriate for every PhD, because of work load, passion for teaching is required.

Theme 3. Development of Community of Practice

Long-term interactions, care for teaching and research: created social learning experience.

Theme 4. Preparation for a Career in Academia

Tensions between research and academic demands allowed students to practice balance.

Theme 5. Areas for Improvement

A Consistent feedback, clear mentor relationships, and greater support for research project.

Implications

- Experience as a Teaching Assistant is not enough
- Long-term learning experience contributed to the richness of learning, experience
- Program prepared participants for not just teaching, but a career in academia
- Program is not right for all PhDs and selection is important for Scholar/program success.

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity. Cambridge University Press