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Considerations and Resources for the Learning Improvement Facilitator

A long-standing purpose of assessment is to help faculty improve student learning; unfortunately, evidence of improved learning is rare (Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009; Banta & Blaich, 2011; Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018). Learning improvement evidence in its most simple form requires practitioners to *assess, intervene,* and *re-assess* a student learning outcome (Fulcher, Good, Coleman, & Smith, 2014). Of course, achieving evidence of learning improvement is not so simple. Technically, assessment expertise is needed to assist with the assess and re-assess components of the model and pedagogical and curricular expertise is needed for the intervene part (Fulcher et al., 2014). Besides this expertise, faculty involvement in a learning improvement project is critical; indeed, Fulcher, Smith, Sanchez, Ames, and Meixner (2017) define exemplary faculty involvement as "Clear evidence of 90–100% of faculty involvement through every aspect of the learning improvement initiative" (p. 15).

Involvement, however, is not limited to faculty within a program, department, area, unit, etc. Other stakeholders and leaders are often involved, such as department heads and other administrators, assessment practitioners, educational developers, industry experts, students, alumni, etc. Coordinating such a diverse group towards a common improvement goal requires a new type of skillset. A practitioner who develops this skillset is considered a "Learning Improvement Facilitator" (LIF). A LIF may or may not have expertise in assessment and/or educational development and thus must be willing to partner with colleagues who do. LIFs possess excellent facilitation skills and are attuned to group dynamics, organizational nuances, and interpersonal communication. That is, the LIF analyzes and accounts for "situational factors" related to learning improvement projects.

Situational factors are variables that influence one's environment (e.g., the environment in which a learning improvement project is being implemented). Fink (2013) discusses situational factors as the first step of "integrated course design" (p. 68). Based

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on Fink's work, we explore organizational culture, leadership, and faculty experiences—as situational factors—related to learning improvement projects. LIFs consider such situational factors prior to facilitating learning improvement projects.

Organizational Culture Situational Factors

When LIFs engage in learning improvement projects they are seeking change (i.e., in student learning; in departmental/organizational practices; in faculty perceptions of assessment, teaching, and learning). Institutional change can be hard to achieve and there is no "one size fits all" approach (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Thus, LIFs study the organizational culture (i.e., environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, faculty and student subcultures, social attitudes, and leadership) and create tailored strategies to implement changes (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Tierney, 1988). Learning improvement initiatives typically involve multiple courses, sections, and learning pathways; likewise, each project will include different stakeholder groups. Therefore, LIFs enter microcultures within the organization (e.g., program, department, area, unit) each time they engage in a learning improvement effort. LIFs analyze each situation and create strategies to optimize a project's success. We recommend LIFs consider the following organizational structure situational factors:

- What is the mission of the program, department, area, or unit? Is teaching and learning emphasized, respected, and/or rewarded within the organizational culture?

- Do the faculty meet regularly? Are the meetings productive and collegial?

- Are there pressing factors that the program, department, area, or unit is facing (e.g., pending closure, budgetary changes, new student populations, external mandates) that may divert attention away from or direct attention toward a learning improvement project?

- Are there philosophical or disciplinary fissures that could affect the learning improvement project?

Leadership Situational Factors

Higher education governance structures typically include formal leaders (e.g., department heads/chairs) and these leaders are key players in a learning improvement project. Such leaders have a complex job; they provide resources and adjust workloads to stimulate scholarship, research, professional development, and other activities for faculty members relative to priorities (Bryman, 2007).

LIFs are cognizant of differences in leadership styles. For instance, Leader A may serve as a group facilitator promoting consensus building across faculty. Alternatively, Leader B may employ an authoritarian style where she/he is the primary decision maker. The LIF should approach the learning improvement project differently if working with Leader A versus Leader B.

The LIF strategizes with leaders regarding resources. For example, once the learning improvement project launches, leaders could provide stipends for faculty to redesign their courses, give course-release time to create and implement an assessment data collection plan, or provide meals during events associated with the project (e.g., a day spent evaluating baseline learning data or a workshop on a teaching strategy). Leaders can also provide special recognition for faculty contributing to the learning improvement project.

As with any relationship, communication is key. Ideally, the leader facilitates open communication across the program, department, area, or unit about the learning improvement project and allows the LIF to access communication channels (e.g., meetings, monthly emails, shared drives). We recommend LIFs consider the following:

A LIF may or may not have expertise in assessment and/or educational development and thus must be willing to partner with colleagues who do. LIFs possess excellent facilitation skills and are attuned to group dynamics, organizational nuances, and interpersonal communication.

- Is there a leader present in the program, department, area, or unit? Does this person have positive rapport with faculty members?

- Does the leader perceive the learning improvement initiative aligns with the larger interest or focus of the program, department, area, or unit?

- Is the leader actively supportive of the learning improvement project?

- Does the leader promote open communication about teaching, learning, assessment, pedagogy, and curricular issues?

Faculty Situational Factors

The faculty champion will likely be the LIF's main point of contact for the project and will shepherd the project through to completion. Faculty champions have sufficient social capital within their program, department, area, or unit to impact change.

In addition to formal leaders, a "faculty champion" is critical to successful learning improvement projects. The faculty champion will likely be the LIF's main point of contact for the project and will shepherd the project through to completion. Faculty champions have sufficient social capital within their program, department, area, or unit to impact change. Such faculty tend to be more senior, having successfully worked with a variety of faculty on other projects and already earned the respect of their colleagues. Faculty champions have established teaching and/or industry expertise. As a bonus, they may also have previous experiences in educational research or assessment practices (e.g., served as an assessment coordinator).

Most importantly, the faculty champion is equipped to serve as a social change agent (Bess & Dee, 2008; Whitchurch, 2009). Change agents:

- motivate faculty around the project,

- make executive decisions when necessary,

- prevent the project from going off-course,

- incorporate faculty feedback in a constructive way,

- effectively communicate initiative goals and results to their fellow faculty members, and

- demonstrate sustained fervor for the initiative.

With that in mind, we recommend LIFs consider the following:

- Is there a faculty champion willing to invest in the learning improvement project?

- Does this faculty champion have social and cultural capital within the boundaries of the learning improvement project?

- Does this faculty champion have expertise in teaching, learning, pedagogy, and/or industry connections or experiences?

Faculty members, adjuncts, and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) not serving in leadership roles (i.e., not necessarily faculty champions) are still central to successful learning improvement projects. They will carry out the pedagogical and curricular changes intended to improve students' learning. Unfortunately, cultures and procedures can make GTAs and part-time faculty feel underappreciated and undervalued (Muzaka, 2009). Nonetheless, the LIF must be inclusive of all relevant parties when engaging in a learning improvement project, even if some people will not be involved for a sustained period of time (e.g., GTAs who will graduate).

LIFs are prepared for personnel instability. Indeed, high faculty turnover rates are common in higher education (Nagowski, 2006) and can halt or delay improvement endeavors. Therefore, it is possible that faculty will receive training related to the learning improvement project and then leave before the project is complete. Given faculty turnover is inevitable,

LIFs must create sustainable support structures. For example, the LIF could encourage a training session be integrated into new faculty orientations or the department head could build in dedicated time at departmental retreats to discuss the learning improvement effort.

Teaching is a vulnerable activity; it can be tied to a faculty member's self-identity. The LIF, therefore, is responsible for creating an environment where the isolated instructor becomes part of a communicative learning improvement team. Within the team, the LIF ensures that individual faculty feel safe sharing and helps them embrace the uncertainties of self-exposure. Engaging with a learning improvement project requires faculty to make visible their teaching, which is often hidden from colleagues. If instructors do not understand what their colleagues are doing in their respective classrooms the learning improvement initiative will falter. Related to faculty situational factors, we recommend the LIF consider:

- Do the faculty, adjuncts, and GTAs have productive working relationships with one another? If there are rifts among groups what are the causes? Can they be addressed?

- Are all instructors in the unit included in discussions/meetings (including GTAs, part-time faculty)?

- Is there projected high faculty turnover (e.g., are there impending retirements on the horizon)?

- Do all instructors regularly engage in detailed conversations about their teaching, program improvement, and student learning? If not, how do they feel about having such conversations?

Resources

Focusing on improvement may imply something is broken. On the contrary, we view improvement as a healthy opportunity to grow and develop. LIFs take on roles that require facilitation skills, a keen awareness of human factors and group dynamics, in addition to a general knowledge of assessment and educational development. We believe assessment professionals, in particular, are well situated to grow into this new role (although assessment expertise in not a requirement for the LIF). Resources are available for those who aspire to become LIFs.

Professional Development

The LIF must have excellent facilitation skills. We recommend that future LIFs complete at least one workshop on facilitation. A variety of facilitation training modules are available at Lynda.com and other online professional development websites such as the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE). In addition, we recommend attending the Professional Organizational Development (POD) Network's annual conference. POD participants are exposed to a range of facilitation styles. Additionally, POD sessions review a variety of faculty issues that a LIF must be familiar with. Finally, because conflict can arise in conversations related to learning improvement, we recommend considering workshops related to conflict resolution, such as those offered by the National Conflict Resolution Center: http://www.ncrconline.com/mediation-conflict-resolution/training-services/available-workshops.

Strategy

Given learning improvement projects are resource intensive, it behooves the LIF to be selective in the first group they work with on their campus. We recommend selecting a group that has the highest likelihood of success and then use their success as a "proof of concept" for scaling up future learning improvement efforts. We found success in implementing a request for proposals (RFP). With a RFP groups self-identify their interest in engaging in learning improvement work. The RFPs are typically submitted by faculty champions in collaboration with leadership. LIFs can begin analyzing situational factors

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through questions they ask in the RFP. At Auburn University elements are included in the RFP that prompt an initial exploration of situational factors (see Appendix). In addition, the Auburn submission process requires a one-hour consultation with the LIF, which allows the LIF to begin unpacking and understanding situational factors prior to deciding with which group to initially invest their resources.

Conclusion

Implementing successful learning improvement projects requires a distinct skillset—what we have defined as a Learning Improvement Facilitator. The LIF is an adept facilitator, prepared to meet the challenges associated with various situational factors (e.g., organizational culture, leadership, faculty). The proliferation of learning improvement projects engenders new research questions worth investigating. For example, a LIF may empirically explore:

- What are the most common factors that draw attention to or divert attention away from learning improvement projects? How do practitioners either leverage or overcome such factors?

- What is the relationship between the amount of leadership support and success of learning improvement projects?

- Does focusing on a new student learning outcome versus improving an existing learning outcome affect the success of a learning improvement project?

As more examples of improved student learning are shared we hope to see more individuals identifying as LIFs. Ultimately, LIFs are an important catalyst in improving the quality of higher education.

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Appendix

One Element of Auburn University's Learning Improvement Request for Proposals (RFP)

Element	Questions	Rationale for Inclusion
Program Characteristics	Describe the attitude toward learning improvement in your department, program, organization, or area (e.g., attitude toward teaching/learning/improvement, collegiality)	Here we are exploring the organizational environment related to teaching and learning. This is especially important given that this institution has a high focus on research productivity.
	Describe the communication/collaboration channels among faculty currently (e.g., how frequently the faculty meet and work together)	Here we are exploring the situational factor related to faculty collegiality and general department, program, organization, or area culture.