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Small teaching, big results: Leveraging department chairpersons to improve teaching and learning

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Abstract

The Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU) created a Small Teaching Challenge, leveraging department chairpersons to encourage faculty adoption of evidence-based, small teaching practices. Inspired by James Lang's *Small Teaching* (2016) and previous collaborations with department chairpersons, the Small Teaching Challenge reached 12 out of 18 departments and 29% of full-time faculty. Post-challenge survey results revealed 94% of participating faculty would likely continue the small teaching practices, and 100% of department chairpersons would participate again. The article reviews literature on department chairpersons' contributions to faculty development, program details, results, and implications for educational developers.

Keywords: chairpersons, small teaching, challenge, EBIPS

While our Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (hereafter Center) has long been successful in reaching individual and small groups of faculty through consultations, midterm feedback student surveys, speaker events, short courses, and competitive internal grants, our team recently broadened our focus to initiate more departmental and college collaborations, drawing on the relationships among faculty

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and their leaders to influence change. In their framework for effective educational development leadership, Wright et al. (2018) argued that relationships are one of the core aspects of the work of centers for teaching and learning (CTLs). In recognition of this fact, our Center has often sought to build collaborative relationships with leadership to learn more about the work facing faculty, to identify opportunities to contribute to teaching and learning initiatives, and to build trust in our Center's contributions. The Small Teaching Challenge (hereafter Challenge) was created to leverage these existing relationships with department chairpersons with two goals in mind: to facilitate the adoption of evidence-based teaching practices and to encourage departments to collaborate on teaching and learning initiatives.

A series of encounters with one department chairperson led us to create the Challenge. Our Center had limited success reaching faculty in one of our campus's largest departments. While few faculty in the department had collaborated with the Center, overall we had not (yet) been successful reaching the bulk of these 30+ faculty members. Moreover, as director, I had not persuaded the chairperson of that department to change tactics in getting faculty to make use of our services. In one frank conversation over lunch, a Center colleague and I framed this to the chair as a communication problem. We recommended that instead of forwarding our Center's email announcement of programs to department faculty in a mass email, the chairperson could instead reach out to faculty personally, recommend a specific Center program, and explain why the recommendation was a good idea. To sweeten the deal, if the chairperson encouraged 10 faculty (representing one-third of the department) to participate in our Teaching Partners program, we would host a lunch for the entire department to celebrate and unpack the results.

Upon reflection, I can see how ours was a big ask. Not only were we asking this chairperson to persuade one-third of department faculty to engage with us in a time-intensive program, but we were additionally requesting them to ask *all* faculty to attend a closing-the-loop session

the following semester. To my surprise, the chairperson enthusiastically agreed that this was a good strategy, focused communications on new faculty, and promptly reached the goal we set.

We were delighted to host lunch the following spring, and I began to dream up other kinds of challenges for department chairpersons. What kinds of incentives could our Center provide to encourage this level of engagement with our team and departmental colleagues? Is food the magical motivator for faculty to engage in our programming (maybe), or did we simply need to be more direct in asking chairpersons to leverage their own power with faculty? Could we replicate this success with other departments? At the core of this anecdote are relationships. We had built a relationship over time with this department chairperson—who trusted us to provide engaging, helpful programming to new faculty—and they had built relationships with departmental faculty who trusted their advice. The following provides a review of literature connecting department leadership to cultural change, a program description, results and discussion, and implications for practice.

Chairpersons and Centers Promoting Change

Department chairpersons have long been identified as keys to both the development of individual faculty and of departmental teaching culture. Hilsen and Rutherford (1991) placed chairpersons on the "front line" of improving colleagues' performance in the classroom. Their work recognizes chairpersons' direct role in observing and documenting teaching but does not acknowledge the more informal ways in which chairpersons contribute to teacher development, or, more broadly, to a departmental culture of teaching. Chairpersons, as a communication conduit between faculty and upper administration can "facilitate ongoing reflection and conversation to identify clear goals and establish agreed-upon strategies to move toward those goals. These strategic conversations link them vertically to those above them

in the hierarchy, as well as to those below them" (Senge, 2000, p. 285). Chairpersons can provide the space and time to give attention to communal sharing, which is necessary to the development of a departmental teaching culture (Klaf & Irvin, 2022). Myllykoski-Laine et al. (2023) echoed the need for communal sharing as an opportunity to share experiences, values, and common objectives, particularly in terms of "a desire to support teaching and pedagogical development" (p. 950). Others have noted that informal opportunities to share can be powerful in terms of academic development (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; McCune, 2018; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015; Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

Brown et al. (2015) described departmental partnerships between chairpersons and educational developers. Emphasizing the importance of partnering with units, they argue that "working together, unit leaders and CTL representatives can create supportive spaces for collegial conversation and sharing of best practices." Communal sharing could provide CTLs an opportunity for productive collaboration with chairpersons, if provided access. However, Aitken and Sorcinelli (1994) addressed how deans and department chairpersons are sometimes inaccessible to educational developers, stating "there are few early intervention strategies that allowed us to work directly with this critical group of individuals" (p. 71).

Recognizing the need for collaboration with chairpersons is one thing; creating sustainable change across a department is another, as educational developers have long understood. To identify how faculty developers develop and sustain change, Eckel (2002) provided a useful framework, citing examples from the Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation by the American Council on Education (ACE). Eckel identified three important but difficult-to-achieve aspects to the work of faculty developers seeking transformational change. They need to (1) develop institution-wide momentum and energy, (2) remove barriers to adoption and engagement, and (3) help people think differently about traditional practices. Each of Eckel's three aspects can be seen in the details of the Challenge below and can

provide a framework for educational developers seeking to develop transformational programming at their institutions.

Program Description

The Small Teaching Challenge was implemented at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU), a private, STEM-focused, predominantly white institution located in Daytona Beach, Florida. The campus enrolls approximately 8,000 students and employs over 500 faculty. The campus houses four colleges in arts and sciences, aviation, business, and engineering, with 18 departments total.

In Summer 2022, Center staff reached out to department chairpersons to describe the Challenge and answer questions about the process of joining and completing the Challenge. In summary, we asked chairpersons to work directly with department faculty to select one of three small teaching practices and determine which faculty would be implementing the selected practice during Fall 2022. The three practices were chosen because they were applicable across disciplines and course levels while also easy to understand and adopt. Our Center then worked with our campus's Institutional Research office to add optional questions to end-of-course student evaluations, measuring the frequency and effectiveness of the practice. Finally, our Center agreed to host department lunches during Spring 2023 to reflect on implementation and student feedback.

While faculty could individually implement any or all three small teaching practices, the Challenge limited departments to select only one of the practices to encourage departmental collaboration around a single practice. Any number of faculty could participate on behalf of the department, but chairpersons were informed that the department achieving the highest percentage of faculty participating would earn a $2,000 award. Awards were added later that recognized individual accomplishments on end-of-course evaluation ratings by students and were not monetary.

Step 1: Introducing the Challenge

Faculty were introduced to the Challenge in August 2022 in brief presentations to departments at start-up meetings or by email for those departments not hosting start-up meetings. Chairpersons then worked with interested department faculty to select one of three small teaching practices to be implemented during Fall 2022:

> First Few/Last Few: asks faculty to be more intentional in how they structure the first few and last few minutes of class to facilitate instructor assessment and the transfer of student knowledge across contexts. (Akhtar & Saeed, 2020; Leigh, 2012)
>
> Assignment Wrapper: asks students to reflect on their recent performance on a major assignment (exam, paper, project, and the like), as well as their preparations for that assignment. (Chew et al., 2016; Lovett, 2013; Stephan et al., 2019)
>
> Prediction Method: asks faculty to present students with a problem and ask them to predict outcomes before receiving formal instruction, allowing students to see whether they understand key concepts and to regulate their learning of new material. (Lang, 2016; Lim et al., 2010; Ogan et al., 2009)

Step 2: Developing the Practice

Each small teaching practice was selected by our Center because they could be easily implemented with some foundational support. We provided departments and individual faculty with multiple levels of support once enrolled in the program:

- online resources for each practice, which provided a summary of evidence supporting the practice, offered advice for

adoption, and modeled examples from a variety of disciplines (see Appendix A for an example)
- consultations for individual faculty
- department-specific workshops
- midterm feedback survey of students which included questions on the small teaching practice

While we did not gather specific data on how many consultations and midterm feedback survey requests directly related to the Challenge, anecdotally we believe many faculty requested a variety of these services from our team.

Step 3: Soliciting Student Feedback

One required element of participation in the Challenge was that faculty agreed to add two optional questions to end-of-course student evaluations. Below are examples of the two questions added to sections taught by faculty adopting the First Few/Last Few practice:

1. Your instructor used the First Few/Last Few method at the beginning and end of some of your class sessions. When doing the First Few/Last Few method, the instructor takes a few minutes at the beginning and end of some of your class sessions to help remind students about previous course material, prepare students for new material, provide transitions, and/or to help make connections between classes. How often did your instructor use a version of the First Few/Last Few method in class this semester?
   Response choices were *regularly*, *several times*, *a few times*, *not at all*, and *I'm not sure*. Students selecting *not at all* or *I'm not sure* did not receive Question 2.
2. To what extent did the First Few/Last Few method contribute to your learning in the class?
   Response choices were *a lot*, *somewhat*, *very little*, *not at all*, and *I'm not sure*.

The first question had two purposes: to show faculty if the practice was transparent to students (we encouraged transparency with students as a best practice) and to verify whether the faculty member was implementing the practice.

While the program itself required end-of-course student evaluation feedback, Center staff also offered mid-semester student surveys to support faculty adoption and encourage student feedback on the practice.

Step 4: Closing the Loop

The Center hosted department lunches post-implementation (Spring 2023) to discuss results. After results were analyzed, departments and faculty were selected for awards, which were presented at a Small Teaching Showcase in April 2023. In addition to departments receiving an award for highest percentage of faculty participating, additional awards were presented to departments and individual faculty achieving high ratings from students on the practice.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the Challenge became our most popular program, to date, both in terms of initial participation and satisfaction from participants. Below are results from the first year of the Challenge, as well as results from three surveys to department chairpersons and faculty who participated.

Participation

Twelve out of 18 departments chose to participate, two of which participated with 100% of their faculty. In addition, 132 of 450 faculty (29%) across the campus participated, reaching 251 individual course sections, and more than 6,500 students.

Student Feedback

End-of-course evaluation responses (*n* = 4,400) rated the small teaching practices at 4.0/5 in contributing to students' learning in the class. In addition, many faculty chose to participate in mid-semester student surveys to solicit early feedback on the practice (*n* = 28).

Chairperson and Faculty Feedback

Three surveys were developed to gauge satisfaction with the program:

- In a survey to participating department chairpersons, the top reasons for participating in the Challenge were (1) trust that the small teaching practice would promote student success, (2) the opportunity to try a new teaching practice, and (3) the support of the Center in this initiative (*n* = 7). All respondents indicated they were open to participating in the Challenge again. In Year 2, 10 out of 12 departments enrolled in the Challenge again (see Appendix B).
- In a survey to participating faculty, the top reasons for participating in the Challenge were the same as for department chairpersons: (1) trust that the small teaching practice would promote student success, (2) the opportunity to try a new teaching practice, and (3) the support of the Center in this initiative (*n* = 34). All respondents indicated they would be open to participating in the Challenge again (see Appendix C).
- In a survey to participating faculty one year later, 67% of respondents (*n* = 53) indicated they were still implementing the small teaching practice in one or more courses.

Unexpected Outcomes

While the intentions of the Challenge were to lead to the adoption of small, evidence-based teaching practices and to encourage

departmental collaborations around teaching, we also identified several unexpected outcomes, both welcome and unwelcome.

While we incentivized participation from departments with a cash award, we were surprised that two departments participated with 100% of their faculty. Each department chair indicated that they felt competitive about the Challenge and wanted to highlight to their deans that they were able to reach 100% of their faculty.

One disappointing outcome stemmed from a department chair's push to *require* participation in the Challenge, despite our team's repeated warnings of the pushback that could result. When the chairperson realized only half of their faculty had been confirmed to participate, bad feelings resulted, with our Center smack in the middle. This outcome, however, reinforced the importance of clear communication from the outset and ongoing communication throughout the process. Centers may seek to create additional guardrails to ensure expectations are clear to chairpersons and faculty.

Another unexpected outcome stemmed from faculty feedback, post-implementation. A few faculty remarked that while they were happy to have participated, and had good results from the small teaching practice, they could not see the practice being successful in other contexts (from an undergraduate course to a graduate course, for example). While the practices were selected to have broad implementation potential, some faculty did not view the practices in the same way.

More positively, faculty participation in the Challenge may have led to additional engagement with the Center during the semester of implementation, as 36% of participating faculty increased their engagement with our team from the previous year, beyond their participation in the Challenge. In addition, 23% of faculty participating in the Challenge had not participated in our programming at all during the previous year. Our Center was also surprised by the number of departments choosing to participate again in Year 2 (10 out of 12).

Implications for Practice

Eckel's (2002) "straightforward tasks"—to build institution-wide momentum and energy, to remove barriers, and to help people think differently—are recognizable in the details, results, and feedback that we received from participants. By creating a campus-wide challenge and focusing on departments and chairpersons, we sought to encourage campus-wide energy, conversation, and action toward the adoption of small teaching practices. By focusing on *small* teaching practices and making the process as simple as possible, we removed many barriers that can prohibit faculty from participating in the Center's programming. The chosen practices were easy to learn and easy to adopt, and our team's support made the process of adoption simple. Furthermore, we hope faculty believe that not only can small teaching practices lead to big results, but continued collaborations with departmental colleagues (and the Center) are valuable experiences that can garner positive results with students.

For educational developers, the Challenge helps make the case for several paths forward with faculty.

Small teaching practices can lead to broad impact. While the Challenge was designed to show faculty that small changes could lead to big results, which student feedback echoed, a focus on small teaching by CTLs could lead to big results in terms of faculty engagement. Given the numbers of faculty connecting with our programming who had previously not worked with us in the prior year, we see great potential in scaled-down programming leading to bigger results in the longer term. One iteration of the Challenge could be a focus on inclusive teaching practices. This would serve not only to promote these important practices but also to emphasize an incremental approach to adoption, which could be appealing to faculty inexperienced with, or resistant to, inclusive teaching overall.

Another variation of the Challenge could be to focus on cohorts of faculty who might be eager for scaled-down programming: new faculty. What small teaching practices would your institution like to see

new faculty adopt in their first semester of classes on your campus? Drawing new faculty's attention on small teaching practices could be a gateway to additional Center programming, as we experienced at ERAU with senior faculty.

In addition, there is the added potential for faculty to measure the impact of their changes beyond student satisfaction at midterm or on end-of-course evaluations. As we mentioned previously, faculty identified other ways to measure the impact of these small teaching practices. Encouraging faculty not only to adopt small practices but also to expand their efforts in later semesters to measuring the impact could provide a bridge to a scholarship of teaching and learning initiative.

Relationships between CTLs and department chairpersons can lead to increased engagement with faculty. While many CTLs focus on individual engagement with faculty, the Challenge provides a model of engagement that harnesses the political power of department chairpersons to leverage faculty engagement. Furthermore, the engagement provides departments with a model for additional engagement with CTLs on teaching and learning initiatives. How might CTLs engage leadership in other ways to improve engagement with faculty?

CTLs can and should leverage departmental structures and chairpersons. While food might be a magical motivator (it is), our Center learned that chairpersons have persuasive power that can be accessed in a direct, transparent way. We were direct with chairpersons about our intentions for the program and for their role: not simply to increase engagement with faculty individually but also to encourage departmental collaborations. A transparent push to department chairpersons could be what is needed to drive cultural change in departments.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Small Teaching Challenge serves as an illustration of relationship-rich educational development, through its departmental

collaborations and direct engagement with leadership on a CTL's initiatives. The Small Teaching Challenge not only was successful in promoting the adoption of evidence-based teaching practices with ERAU's faculty but also illustrated the transformative role of departmental leadership in shaping teaching cultures. The enthusiastic participation from departments and faculty underscores a growing recognition of the impact that small teaching practices can have on student learning. More significantly, however, our collaboration with department chairpersons has proven instrumental in overcoming barriers to faculty engagement. By leveraging existing relationships and acknowledging the pivotal role of departmental leaders, we have successfully navigated challenges and contributed to a culture of collaboration on teaching initiatives among faculty. While some challenges arose, these experiences strengthened our commitment to transparent communication, small-sized programming, and our Center's role in affecting change.

The implications of our work have the potential to extend beyond our own context. We invite educational developers and faculty leaders to consider more broadly ways to innovate faculty engagement with centers for teaching and learning. As we reflect on our journey, we are encouraged by the potential for future relationship-rich engagement to continue to build on these successes and inspire faculty to embrace new opportunities for educational development.

Biography

Lori Mumpower is Executive Director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching Excellence at the University of Illinois Chicago. Dr. Mumpower previously directed the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Daytona Beach.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author has no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A. Online Resource Provided to Faculty

First Few/Last Few

Definition and Purpose:
In some ways, the first and last few minutes of class are the most important, in that they provide important bookends for students' classroom experience. The First Few/Last Few method asks faculty to be intentional in the ways that they engage with students in the first and last few minutes of class in order to provide transitions from previous concepts, provide roadmaps for the class to come, improve connections across classes, improve content acquisition, and facilitate the transfer of knowledge across contexts.

Educational Research:
Low-stakes active learning activities, such those delivered in the first or last few minutes of class, have been shown to increase student engagement and provide students with immediate feedback on their formative learning (Akhtar & Saeed, 2020). For instance, Leigh's (2012) study links exit slip routines to learning practices such as reflection and metacognition. Despite the brevity of these activities, they can bridge students' learning across class meetings and offer educators opportunities to gauge what students are thinking and how well they are taking up new knowledge.

- Akhtar, M., & Saeed, M. (2020). Assessing the effect of agree/disagree circles, exit ticket, and think-pair-share on students' academic achievement at undergraduate level. *Bulletin of Education and Research*, *42*(2), 81–96.
- Leigh, S. R. (2012). The classroom is alive with the sound of thinking: The power of the exit slip. *Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *24*(2), 189–196.

Developing First Few/Last Few Activities:
The exact activity used to begin or end a class can vary. However, these activities need to be regularly delivered as part of a reliable routine. Like any class routine, it is helpful to explain to students why they are completing these activities and how they add to their learning in the course.

Students can engage with different First Few/Last Few activities each class meeting, or they can complete the same prompt or activity (e.g., "Identify a concept from today's lecture and explain how you will use this concept in your career post-graduation," or "What is one detail that was most interesting to you from today's class meeting, and what is one question you still have regarding this topic?"). The process for creating a First Few/Last Few activity is summarized below:

- Decide what you want to accomplish with these starting/ending activities. Put differently, what do you want to know about students' learning?
- Design the activity by determining how much time students will need and what you want them to do. Will they write, discuss, or respond to a problem?
- Consider how you will review and assess student work. These low-stakes activities do not need to be formally graded, but students will take activities more seriously if they know their responses are being reviewed in some way. For instance, students could post their responses to a shared learning space (such as a class Padlet or WordCloud), or you could briefly read through student responses and grade them complete/incomplete.

Appendix B. Survey to Department Chairpersons

1. Please rate your motivations for participation in the Small Teaching Challenge:

   Trust that the small teaching practice would promote student success
   Competitive teamwork with others in my department
   Conversations with department colleagues about effective teaching
   Recommendation from chair or coordinator that I join
   Opportunity to try a new teaching practice
   Participation wasn't time- or labor-intensive
   Recognition of excellent teaching at the individual level
   Awards, money prizes, and CTLE-hosted lunches
   Support of CTLE and its initiative

2. Would you be interested in having your department participate in another Small Teaching Challenge?

Appendix C. Survey to Participating Faculty

1. Please rate your motivations for participation in the Small Teaching Challenge:

   Trust that the small teaching practice would promote student success
   Competitive teamwork with others in my department
   Conversations with department colleagues about effective teaching
   Recommendation from chair or coordinator that I join
   Opportunity to try a new teaching practice
   Participation wasn't time- or labor-intensive
   Recognition of excellent teaching at the individual level
   Awards, money prizes, and CTLE-hosted lunches
   Support of CTLE and its initiative

   Sliding scale response options, from 1 (low) to 5 (high)

2. Are you going to continue your adopted small teaching practice in the future? (not likely, maybe, yes)
3. What factors will influence your decision to continue (or not) with this small teaching practice?
4. Are you interested in participating in another Small Teaching Challenge? (not likely, maybe, yes)
5. What factors will impact your decision to participate (or not) in another Small Teaching Challenge?