

Building a Collaborative Network of Faculty to be Inclusive Learner-Centered Teachers

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Introduction & Need for Innovation

The National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) incentivizes innovations in higher education and building organizational capacities through collaborative projects that will be sustained by changing the structure, organizational culture, and strengthening networks and relationships within and among different land-grant universities. Due to several factors (i.e., legislation, historical, cultural, geographic, political, purposes and priorities, and funding), 1862 and 1890 land-grant universities have collaborated on various discovery, engagement, and learning projects, but overall, collaboration has been limited. In spite of the differences, 1862 and 1890 land-grant universities have a common mission to develop human capacity for the workforce and communities through its teaching and learning enterprise.

The American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) focuses developing faculty to build human capacities and engaging public audiences and communities around important agricultural, food, and environmental issues. Requests for grant proposals call for multi-institutional and interdisciplinary collaboration. Among the land-grant university community, 1890 Historically Black Colleges and Universities focus on engaging students through learner-centered teaching, applied research projects, and community-based Extension programs that address social injustices. Although there is common ground in building human capital through education, there have been limited collaborations between 1890 and 1862 land-grant institutions. AAAE has strategic initiatives to build a more inclusive culture within the society and increase collaboration among members and with faculty in other social science and agriculture and related sciences disciplines. Garton (2019) challenged the AAAE profession to be more inclusive. With a focus on inclusive learner-centered teaching to engage college students in developing human capacities for careers in food, agriculture, natural resources, and health sciences, the purpose of this innovative project was to convene faculty from 1862 and 1890 land-grant universities to share ideas, build a network, and explore common interests for future collaborations.

Program Phases & Steps

Project directors of an 1890 Capacity Building NIFA Grant reached out to the NorthCentral AAAE leadership team. The two groups agreed to host a joint conference with a theme of “Bridging Differences,” in October, 2019. The National Learner-Centered Teaching Conference occurred as a one-day pre-conference to the NC-AAAE Conference, which started the evening of October 10 and concluded by noon of October 12. This joint conference was the result of the NC-AAAE leadership team being willing to coordinate the two conferences together. Upon conclusion of the 2019 NC-AAAE Business Meeting, a resolution was passed to continue the collaboration. Due to COVID19, a virtual conference was held in October, 2020, that integrated the National LCT Conference into the NC-AAAE Conference. For both years, abstracts were submitted through the AAAE poster portal. Grant funding support the National LCT Conference in 2019 and paid conference registrations for 1890 faculty in 2020. There were 60 participants who attended the National LCT Conference in 2019, and 130 participants in the NC-AAAE/NLCTC in 2020. There were 15 LCT presentations in 2019, and 18 LCT presentations in 2020. Thirty-nine participants in 2019 and 62 participants in 2020 completed a post-conference questionnaire about their experiences. Perceptions of the participants were ascertained using post-conference questionnaires; they were different because of the evolution of the collaborative partnership and the format of the conferences being face-to-face and virtual.

Results to Date & Implications

Results from the post-test questionnaire completed at the end of the first day and 97% of the participants were satisfied with the National LCT Conference. Regarding ideas and skills learned at the National LCT Conference, in 2019, 87% of the participants felt they could use the ideas and skills to a moderate to great extent. Participants reported the conference helped them “quite-a-bit” to “a great deal” regarding the following outcomes: 92% - strengthened their network with other teaching colleagues; 82% - were able to identify new resources they could use in their teaching; 79% - helped them develop new relationships with other teaching colleagues; 69% - made new connections for research collaboration on teaching; 59% - helped them collaboratively develop new ways of teaching. In 2020, 77% agreed learner-centered teaching was a relevant theme for participants in all discipline areas, and 75% agreed diversity, equity and inclusion was a relevant theme for participants in all discipline areas. Moreover, 90% felt the conference was inclusive, 80% felt the conference participants were open-minded, and 33% agreed this conference provided a platform for future collaborations. These results show that faculty from 1862 and 1890 land-grant universities reported they were able to broaden their network, identify teaching ideas, build new relationships, explore potential collaborations, and feel more self-efficacious to develop inclusive LCT classrooms. The common ground among faculty from 1890 institutions and the AAAE membership to share best practices of building human capacity through learner-centered teaching and engagement is an opportunity to continue to advance future collaborations across institutions, disciplines, and mission areas of discovery, learning, and engagement. Tropman (2014) described a high leverage event where people discuss topics that create momentum.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

After two years of successfully co-hosting a professional conference, the NC-AAAE and the National LCT Partnership is continuing to collaborate on planning a 3rd conference. We have seven recommendations for those interested in building cross-institutional and cross-cultural collaborative partnerships: (1) build on existing relationships; (2) leverage existing human, organizational, and financial capacities (Social Entrepreneurs, 2011); (3) promote and market the conference opportunity through multiple forms of communication and contact (Nixon & Littlepage, 1992); (4) focus on collaboration and strengthening a network of committed participants (Frey et al., 2006); (5) promote engagement and positive interactions among participants (Thompson, 2016); (6) facilitate a learning purpose and trust-building (Perrault et al., 2011; Vangen & Huxham, 2003); and, (7) be open, listen to feedback, and make adjustments.

Costs & Resources Needed

The conference was supported by a NIFA 1890 Capacity-Building Grant Project (2016-06658), Building Future Faculty and Leaders through Culturally Responsive Learner-Centered Teaching Partnerships. Seventeen faculty were provided travel support to attend the conference (\$17,000; \$1,000 per faculty) and the cost of the conference for facilities, supplies, and refreshments was (\$4,300; \$72 per participant). The total costs for travel and the conference was \$60,000 (\$100 per participant). In 2020, the registration for the virtual conference was \$100 per participant.

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