Not Dean School: Leadership Development for Faculty Where They Are

By Karrin E. Wilks, Christopher Shults, & James J. Berg

Leadership development for faculty often is designed as training for administration, but faculty demonstrate leadership in the classroom, in their departments, college-wide, and beyond. To fully realize and leverage this leadership potential, colleges must design opportunities for faculty to hone their knowledge and skills as active participants in furthering institutional priorities. The authors set the context for faculty leadership and provide an overview of the design and implementation of the Borough of Manhattan Community College Faculty Leadership Fellows Program, which aims to strengthen faculty leadership from multiple perspectives, including pedagogy, mentoring, and high impact practices—engaging faculty where they are.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT for faculty too often is designed as training for administration, but faculty demonstrate leadership in the classroom, in their departments, college-wide, and beyond. To fully realize and leverage this leadership potential, colleges must design opportunities for faculty to hone their knowledge and skills as active participants in furthering institutional priorities—to improve teaching and learning and institutional effectiveness. The Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) designed and implemented its Faculty Leadership Fellows Program in 2016-2017 to strengthen faculty leadership from multiple perspectives, including pedagogy, mentoring, and high impact practices—not assuming preparation for administration, but engaging faculty in their current role(s). This essay will provide an overview of the Leadership Fellows Program, which is informed by research on educational leadership (Aspen Institute, 2013; Shugart, 2013; Kotter, 1995), faculty development (Aspen Institute, 2014; Cooper & Pagotto, 2003), and positive organizational scholarship (Cameron & Dutton, 2003; Cameron, 2012; Worline & Dutton, 2017) as well as leadership competencies developed by the AACC (2013) and perspectives on educational equity (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2015).

This body of research informed our program design process, the definition of guiding principles, and a conceptual framework for BMCC’s faculty leadership development. The following guiding principles shaped program curriculum, implementation, and evaluation:

1. Students can learn anything under the right conditions. Rather than viewing poor preparation and students’ life circumstances as insurmountable barriers, we must be deeply engaged in examining our own practices and developing theories that create the conditions under which all students can learn.

2. We must share responsibility for the quality of pedagogy at our college. Teaching must be public, not remain behind closed doors, in order for learning outcomes to significantly improve. There is overwhelming evidence that we can design for improved student success. When colleges have a culture based on student success, faculty consistently invent ways to improve student outcomes and share their inventions with their colleagues.

3. Significantly improving student success requires strong, visible and pervasive pedagogical leadership, such that the most effective practices are recognized and scaled. Put more directly, faculty are the mechanism for scaling success, so it is critical to engage faculty in leadership development from where they are, not just from formal leadership roles.

4. Developing a leadership identity is an intentional process that weaves personal and professional
narratives, both individual and collective, based on history and the fictive future. Storytelling is essential to the development of leadership identity.

5. Successful colleges collaboratively design for success, a process that begins with dialogue and a collective understanding about what student success looks like in the classroom and across the institution. There must be inquiry into what’s working and what needs attention—all driving a faculty culture of student success. Designing faculty leadership programming must follow this same collaborative design principle.

6. Building open and productive relationships across departments and disciplines, among tenured and untenured faculty, and among faculty and administrators is vital to creating a collaborative culture designed for student success, one that practices and celebrates teaching excellence, the review of evidence, and ongoing experimentation. We need to be able to have different kinds of conversations.

The BMCC Faculty Leadership Fellows Program included a week-long seminar in January 2017 and five follow-up sessions throughout the spring semester on specific topics generated by the participants. Fellows were nominated either by their department chair or by a member of the President’s Cabinet. Nominees were notified and invited to submit an application that included their c.v. and a statement about their strengths as a leader, how they view faculty leadership, and the challenges facing the college and the City University of New York (CUNY). Fourteen participants were selected from 18 applications, based on their current leadership roles, current and past active roles at the college, years of service to the institution, and their application statements. The Fellows came from twelve departments, including the largest departments at the college: Social Sciences, Human Services and Criminal Justice (one department); Speech, Communications, and Theater Arts (one department); and English. The Fellows were invited to nominate faculty for the second cohort which begins in January 2018. Fellows included five department chairs, two deputy chairs, two program coordinators, and several untenured faculty. A key feature of the curricular design was to engage the Fellows in developing follow-up session agendas, materials, presentation, and discussion facilitation. Additionally, self-reflection played a major role throughout the program. Both of these strategies contributed to Fellows’ evolving narratives as faculty leaders and the development of personal faculty leadership commitments going forward. The ultimate goal is to encourage faculty to become active participants in transformational change aimed at dramatically improving student success.

This article is organized in four parts: 1) setting the context of the program in relation to institutional priorities and values; 2) exploring the working theories behind the week-long seminar curriculum and the role of the Fellows in developing follow-up sessions; 3) the use of an original case study to analyze leadership scenarios and approaches; and 4) assessing the Program and making changes for the next cohort.

Setting the Context: Defining and Expanding Faculty Leadership

BMCC is one of 24 institutions, including seven community colleges, in CUNY. BMCC is the largest college in CUNY, serving over 27,000 students with over 550 full-time and 1,000 part-time faculty. The student population at BMCC is nearly 45% Hispanic, over 30% Black, nearly 15% Asian, and under 10% White. Almost 80% of first-time freshmen require remediation. The College’s strategic plan is framed by a student progression model that seeks to improve student success at each key transitional point in a student’s educational journey, from college readiness to remediation to the student experience to graduation, transfer, baccalaureate attainment, and ultimately a career with family-sustaining wages. BMCC’s highest priority is improving retention and graduation rates. Not just a little, but dramatically.

BMCC, like any college, cannot significantly improve student outcomes without strong, visible, and pervasive faculty leadership. Faculty are fundamental to creating a culture based on student success, a culture that respects and embraces the challenges and opportunities related to student success, such that when students don’t succeed, faculty and staff routinely respond with theories of change. Most critically, this requires an examination of fundamental beliefs, about our students and the
work we do. Central to a culture based on student success is the belief that students can learn anything under the right conditions. Rather than viewing poor preparation and students’ life circumstances as insurmountable barriers (a deficit model), a sizable coalition must be deeply engaged in examining our own practices and inventing ways to improve student outcomes. Faculty leadership drives the demand for change and deep engagement in an analysis of our own actions.

**Developing the Faculty Leadership Curriculum**

Leadership development programs can address the issues that faculty care about in a way that may increase their efficacy, impact the college culture, and contribute to improved teaching and learning and institutional effectiveness. Specific goals for Fellows included developing a plan to optimize their roles as faculty leaders and making ongoing contributions to the theory and practice of faculty leadership at BMCC. The Senior Vice President and Provost, Dean of Institutional Effectiveness and Strategic Planning, and Associate Dean of Faculty developed the curriculum for the Fellows Program and facilitated or coordinated all sessions. (This is the program development team, referred to below.)

The five-day seminar addressed the following issues:

1. Transformational Leadership: Creating a Culture for Positive Change
2. Leading to Support Teaching, Learning, and Scholarly Inquiry
3. The Role of the Community College: Access, Opportunity, and Workforce Development
4. Leadership and Governance: College, University, State and Federal Policy
5. Faculty Leader as Institutional Leader: Focus on Equity

The first topic, creating a culture for positive change, was informed by positive organizational scholarship literature, particularly by the work of Cameron and Dutton (2003) and Worline and Dutton (2017). A panel of three community college presidents and chancellors spoke about their journeys to leadership and their work as and with faculty. It is important to create an environment in which faculty may thrive in all aspects of their work, and Dr. Worline spoke about the value of compassion in the workplace.

In developing pedagogical leadership, we considered the work of Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, and Norman (2010), and seven principles for smart teaching as they could be applied to leadership development. In addition, we explored the role of faculty in helping students succeed, in and out of the classroom. Important issues for learners that are also key to teachers include motivation, prior knowledge, and reflection. It is important to create a context in which faculty can be reflective about their teaching, receive non-evaluative feedback from their peers, and make teaching more public.

The third day focused on the multiple missions of the community college and the role of faculty in workforce development. As a college with strong connections to business and finance professions, we have curricular pathways to those and other fields. Faculty in all disciplines need to understand their role in preparing students for the world of work, whether after an associate degree or after transfer and a bachelor’s degree. Recent work by Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, and Yagan (2017) illustrates the significant upward income mobility experienced by graduates from the CUNY system overall, not only in traditionally “occupational” fields.

Governance is complicated in public higher education where overlapping layers include city, state, federal and accreditation expectations, as well as the role of CUNY in our case. Another panel of senior leaders addressed the role of campus administrators as extensions of the governing board, entrusted to follow all applicable rules and laws. Faculty tend to see “committee work” and “service” as limited parts of their positions. Yet they shape the policies and procedures of the college, and their work in departments should enact the best structures of shared governance.

The final day examined the student success agenda and identified success gaps among groups of students as a problem of practice. Malcom-Piqueux and Bensimon (2015) show that equity is a measure of institutional effectiveness. Institutions can design for equitable outcomes, and faculty can lead by being positively race-conscious when colleagues focus on student deficits. Faculty can engage one another in reflection and inquiry to address achievement gaps in their own courses and departments.
Each day included time for reflection in a variety of formats. The first day began with a written response to three questions:
1. What are your goals for this program?
2. What are the key assets you bring to your role as faculty leader?
3. What leadership challenges are you/your department/BMCC currently facing.

On some days, questions were provided for either think-pair-share discussions or small group discussions. Most days, individual written reflection was followed by small or whole group discussion, and each day, the final activity was a one-minute assessment focused on what resonated, what questions remained, and what could be applied to individual program goals. The final day ended with reflective writing and sharing in response to the following questions:
1. What are the key elements of your theory of community college leadership?
2. How do you lead from where you are?
3. Where do you want to go in your leadership journey?
4. What resources within BMCC or CUNY are important to you on this journey?
5. What do you plan to do differently as a result of this week?

Participants formalized this reflection in a written document confirming goals, values, and a leadership statement.

Competencies for community college administrators developed by the American Association of Community Colleges (2013) were mapped against the topics over the five days of the seminar. The competencies are organizational strategy, communication, collaboration, advocacy, and institutional finance, research, funding, and resource management. Communication and collaboration were stressed throughout the week-long seminar.

Follow up sessions were held on five Fridays in the following semester. The topics were chosen from suggestions made by the participants, and the Faculty Fellows were invited to help design and deliver the sessions. For all sessions, a group of Fellows worked with one of the program leaders to design and facilitate the session. The topics were leadership communications, using data in decision making, mentoring for teaching and research, equity, and leadership identity. This collaborative curriculum design was intentional and gave the follow-up sessions an added sense of purpose and applicability. At every session we invited Fellows to share elements of their own stories, using autobiographical narrative as a means of analyzing and strengthening leadership identity—transitioning from personal narrative to self-as-leader. This storytelling made for rich and very direct conversations not always experienced with the Provost, two deans, and faculty in one room.

**Using the Case Study as a Learning Tool for Faculty Professional Development**

Building upon the theoretical framework and institutional philosophies guiding the BMCC Faculty Leadership Fellows Program, we used the case study as a tool to integrate the theoretical knowledge and practical information in a hypothetical environment in which the Fellows could directly apply the lessons they were learning. Given that “despite the widespread use of case study methods throughout the social sciences, no consensus has emerged as to the proper definition, either of a case or a case study” (Levy, 2008, p. 2), the program development team chose to implement a model that was guided by generally accepted practices within the field, while meeting the needs unique to faculty development.

Levy provides a useful typology of case study approaches that provided guidance on which approach to take. The idiographic case study identified by the author is non-theoretical in nature and is based on a foundational assumption that all aspects of the case are related to each other and that important learning can occur through examining the interconnections inherent to the case. Another helpful resource was the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM, 2010), which provided a meta-analysis of case studies within the field of public administration. An examination of this important publication offered several examples of case studies that proved useful. These included:

- The Illustrative Case Study – An approach that focuses on the primary characteristics of a real-world setting;
• The Business School Approach – An approach that emphasizes decision-making and decision analysis through a cause and effect methodology; and
• The Field Case Study (Armchair Case Study) – A management or leadership concept is presented by presenting a hypothetical scenario.

The concept of presenting hypothetical scenarios offered a slightly different approach to the more traditional case study model. Nath (2005), in examining the use of the case study approach for training educators, provided a similar model for the case study. The author identified the supplemental scenarios case study method, which is an approach that uses problem sets to allow for a more nuanced analysis of a problem.

Through the use of these important and varied interpretations of the case study, the program development team designed a real-world setting that was constructed by taking information from dozens of institutions and utilizing a historical fiction approach in the creation of the narrative. We titled this hypothetical composite college Chavez-Chisholm Community College and created a fictional history, numerous academic programs and departments, and a set of internal (faculty, staff, and administrators) and external (Board members, activists, business leaders, and politicians) actors. Over each of the five themed days, the Fellows were provided with opportunities to hear from theorists, academics, administrators, and practitioners. Then they utilized the same case as a tool for applying their new knowledge each day. What changed, however, were the unique problem sets that they addressed.

These problem sets contained situations aligned with the day’s theme and any information provided in the case (the College) could prove to be relevant; however, it was up to the participants to determine how to move forward in solving the day’s unique problem set. This method mirrors the supplemental scenario model approach and greatly enhanced the relevance and utility of the case. The participants often had to confront the same actors, consider different approaches to similar problems, and in some cases, had to go back and attempt to solve a problem that was not adequately addressed during one of the previous days. As is typical with the case study approach, there were no right or wrong answers, but rather, effective and ineffective approaches that could either quell or further inflame delicate situations.

The participants received the case prior to the first day of the seminar. Each day, near the end of the session, they received their new problem set, group exercises were conducted, and opportunities for reflection were provided. The Fellows worked in small teams to dissect the problem sets and determine what information from the case was relevant to addressing the day’s unique scenario. After discussing how to address the problem, the groups presented to the entire cohort and the program development team, were asked questions, and were provided with a constructive critique of their response. Again, the purpose of the exercise was not to come up with a correct response, but rather to apply the knowledge learned that day and to utilize different leadership and management approaches.

Assessing the Program and Preparing for the Next Cohort

In addition to formative assessments conducted throughout the program (discussed above), a final survey was administered at the end of the program. Fellows rated the usefulness of each presenter and panel; individual reflection, small group discussion, and whole group discussion; the case study and problem sets; the reading list; and the use of the e-portfolio. The focus on utility was intentional given the program goals for Fellows to develop a plan to optimize their roles as faculty leaders and make ongoing contributions to the theory and practice of faculty leadership at BMCC. An important part of the program design is to support faculty going forward in strengthening their leadership roles at the College, both formal and informal, with particular attention to pedagogical leadership.

Additionally, Fellows submitted their written responses to the following questions to the program team:
1. To what extent did you achieve the goals you set for yourself?
2. Which of your stated values are emerging as most important in your leadership work?
3. To what extent have you “lived” your leadership statement over the past semester? How?
4. In what area(s) have you grown the most as a leader since the beginning of the Fellowship? How do you know?

5. In what area(s) do you still need to grow the most? How do you plan to achieve this growth?

These summative pieces provided rich information about what was most meaningful to the Fellows and how to revise the program going forward. Survey responses and an analysis of written materials (formal assessment) as well as discussion held during the follow up sessions impacted the 2018 BMCC Faculty Leadership Fellows Program in four major ways. These include:

- Maintaining Positive Organizational Scholarship as the underlying theoretical framework for the Institute. Participants appreciated using a strengths-based framework to counteract the negative impacts of engaging in deficit-model approaches.
- Adjusting the topics covered and sessions provided during the institute. Given that The Role of the Community College and Leadership and Governance days were the lowest rated, they have been revamped substantially and re-introduced as The Community College Mission: Policies for Access and Success and Leadership and Students: Faculty Led Institutional Transformation, respectively. In both cases, presenters have been selected who can provide evidence for the redesign of community colleges to improve student success and link that to faculty leadership.
- Reconfiguring the Case Study to encourage faculty to explore leadership at multiple levels. During the first institute, faculty took on the role of Vice President for Academic Affairs during all of the problem sets. The second cohort will address the problem sets in multiple roles that include not only that of Vice President, but also as an untenured faculty member, program coordinator, department chair, and, ironically, a dean.
- Designing problem sets that reflect current difficulties experience by faculty within BMCC’s academic departments. Working with graduates from the initial cohort, new problem sets were developed that provide a more realistic and relevant experience for the Fellows.

As of this writing, BMCC has recruited 16 faculty for cohort two of the Faculty Leadership Fellows Program.

The BMCC Faculty Leadership Fellows Program is designed to build a strong coalition, a vibrant learning community of faculty leaders to improve student success, ultimately to advance equity and social justice. Part of the design is to ensure ongoing roles of Fellows with the next cohort and others, for example, through mentoring new faculty. All members of the first cohort volunteered to work with the second cohort, either through presentations at or facilitations of sessions, or brainstorming the revision of the case study and problem sets. As reported by the Fellows, an important outcome of the first cohort was the development of strong and enduring relationships and commitments across disciplines and with key administrators, the foundation of our strengthening faculty leadership at BMCC.

As we revised the curriculum for our second cohort, we returned to the guiding principles that formed the basis for our program design and the evolving design of our theory and practice of faculty leadership at BMCC. Designing for success must be intentional. This is not about preparing people for formal leadership roles as chairs or deans. This is about our moral obligation and shared responsibility for creating the conditions under which all students can learn and where pedagogical leadership is held in the highest esteem.

References


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The Active Learning Classroom: Strategies for Practical Educators

The goal of the book is simple: To improve student achievement by helping teachers implement active learning strategies in the classroom. To begin, consider the following two questions in relation to your own classroom:

1. Are your students actively engaged throughout the entirety of your daily lessons?
2. Are students meeting your highest expectations regarding achievement?

If you answered ‘no’ to either or both of these questions, you are not alone. Classroom teachers at all levels are challenged with low student engagement, resulting in low student achievement. Numerous studies indicate a positive correlation between engagement and achievement. For this reason, the teacher is the most important component of the learning process, as he/she is ultimately responsible for creating an atmosphere conducive to student achievement.

Active Learning has proven to be one of the most important tools for engaging students, promoting skills in motivation, higher-order thinking, communication, creative thinking, and problem-solving. Most teachers agree that these skills are essential for increasing student achievement; however, these skills are difficult to foster in the traditional ‘sage on a stage’ model. Educators must learn to adopt a new ‘guide on the side’ teaching paradigm whereby traditional instruction is supplemented by active learning strategies.

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Active Learning Classroom
Strategies for Practical Educators
By Jason Creekmore & Shannon Deaton


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