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Deanne Grier Yates

*Kansas City Kansas Community College*

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# Engaging Community College Faculty: The Benefit of Learning Communities

Deanne Grier Yates  
Kansas City Kansas Community College

Keywords: community college faculty engagement, community college faculty involvement, community college faculty satisfaction, learning communities, faculty professional development.

**Abstract:** Community college faculty engagement encouraged by the creation and support of learning communities will be explored. The focus will be on current literature outlining the unique challenges facing community college faculty and the creation and application of learning communities in the community college setting.

## Definitions

For the purpose of this paper, Lightner and Sipple's (2013) definition of learning community will be employed: "voluntary formal groups of interdisciplinary faculty who meet regularly to work on scholarly projects about the profession of learning" (p. 455). Troy (2013) expands on this definition, including member engagement with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning supported by activities that provide development and community building.

Two year colleges, offering technical degrees, applied science and associate degrees are included as community colleges; exclusive vocational schools and adult education centers are not included.

Faculty is considered engaged when they are involved beyond minimal responsibilities, demonstrate an understanding of the mission of the organization and state a feeling of well-being and work satisfaction (Troy, 2013). Engagement of full-time and part-time or adjunct faculty is considered.

## Introduction

Community college faculty work in a complex environment; limited resources, open access enrollment and a heavy workload are common occurrences (Dickinson, 1999). Additionally, community college faculty frequently feel marginalized and held in low regard by not only the four year academics, but frequently by the community they serve (Townsend & LaPaglia, 2000). Time and resources can be scarce. Teaching is the main focus and responsibility leaving little time for professional development and community building (Lightner & Sipple, 2013; Townsend & LaPaglia, 2000). Overscheduled, isolated faculty members often have little energy or desire to increase involvement in the college.

Available literature suggest learning communities can help lessen the challenges community college faculty experience through the sharing of responsibilities, collaboration, feedback and support with other faculty members (Daly, 2011; Jackson, Stebleton, & Frankie, 2013; Outcalt, 2000). However, learning communities in a community college setting are not always embraced by administration and faculty; increased demand on limited time, little reward for professional development, and fear of losing autonomy are areas of concern (Dickinson, 1999; Lightner & Sipple, 2013).

The benefits of creating and participating in faculty learning communities impact the community college as a whole. Faculty members who feel encouraged and supported are more likely to be motivated to become involved in other areas in the institution (Jackson et al., 2013)

and reinvigorated in the classroom. Support of learning communities by administration and building a climate based on openness and trust may increase the benefits of participation in learning communities.

### **Challenges Facing Community College Faculty**

Historically the mission of community colleges has been to provide all students an opportunity to receive a college education (Gabbard & Mupinga, 2013). Meeting this mission requires community college faculty to spend the majority of their time teaching and attending to the needs of a student body that often lack the basic skills needed to succeed in college level courses. In addition to a challenging schedule and students, community college faculty often feel they are held in low regard by the higher education academic community (Townsend & LaPaglia, 2000). These challenges may lead to feelings of isolation which in turn result in reduced participation in the campus community.

### **Workload**

Available research suggests the heavy teaching load and limited time available for scholarship and community lead to feelings of isolation. Community college faculty focus primarily on teaching and spend the a higher percentage of their time in the classroom teaching and attending to student needs during office hours then faculty at a traditional four year university (Fugate & Amey, 2000; Payne, Herndon, McWaine, & Major, 2002). Direct student contact is valued by community college faculty, but they are concerned with limited time and encouragement provided by administration to pursue professional development and interaction with other faculty members (Payne et al., 2002; Townsend & Rosser, 2009). Attempting to meet the responsibilities of teaching in a community college, with limited time and heavy teaching load, may cause faculty to become overwhelmed and isolated.

Isolated, overscheduled, and overwhelmed community college faculty have little time or energy to be fully engaged in the mission of their college. However, the mission of the college often dictates the role and behavior of faculty and unwittingly limit additional involvement in the college community (Townsend & Rosser, 2009). Troy (2013) suggests “faculty engagement can have a tremendous impact not only on student’s future but the future of the college as well” (p. 52). Isolation and heavy workloads are workplace stressors that may lead to decreased job satisfaction and faculty disengagement adversely effecting colleagues, the college and students.

### **Open Enrollment**

Community college open enrollment is another challenge to already overscheduled faculty. The colleges are tasked with offering access to higher learning to a diverse group of students, with different levels of ability, preparation, and a wide range of academic objectives (Cejda, 2010). Overall educational attainment for a variety of students not customarily served by traditional four year colleges and universities is provided by community colleges (Kane & Rouse, 1999). Open door enrollment results in many developmental students; those lacking the basic skills required of college classes. Developmental students require a heavy investment of the community college’s time, money and faculty involvement (Outcalt, 2000). To properly meet the needs of developmental students, while maintaining academic standards, faculty must respond with innovative instructional methods (Gabbard & Mupinga, 2013). The instructors are expected to adjust schedules and teaching methods to meet the needs of all students (Kim, Twombly, &

Wolf-Wendel, 2008). Community college faculty devote a great deal of time in and out of the classroom to meet the needs of students lacking basic skills and students underprepared for class.

Students come to class unprepared for a variety of reasons: demands of children, family, and work, simple lack of motivation, or not having full understanding of academic demands (Freeman, 2007). Student disinterest and lack of preparation disrupts the classroom and adds to workload (Cejda, 2010). The extra work required to tend to the needs of underprepared, unmotivated students is suggested to contribute to faculty reporting decreased job satisfaction (Murray & Cunningham, 2004). Though the focus of community college faculty is on teaching, they also report less satisfaction with students than four year faculty (Fugate & Amey, 2000; Kim et al., 2008). Dissatisfaction with student preparation and motivation can effect faculty engagement due to inordinate time and energy demands.

### **Marginalization**

Community colleges are adept at offering access to higher education and vocational training to a broad student population (Topper & Powers, 2013), but need to improve the public's perception of the value and impact of the services provided (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006). Many students considering enrollment in a community college express concern over the relative small proportion of students who complete degrees, and fear the quality and depth of classes will not be sufficient to prepare them for a four year institution (Kane & Rouse, 1999). Community college is often considered a poor relative to research universities by prospective students, the community, and fellow academics (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006; Fugate & Amey, 2000). The lack of prestige afforded to community college education and by association community college faculty contributes to the perception of marginalization. Community college faculty are committed trained professionals and many do not believe they are provided deserved respect and acknowledgement (Fugate & Amey, 2000). The perception of marginalization further contributes to decreased engagement in the college community.

### **Faculty Engagement**

Being fully engrossed and involved in one's work, reaching beyond basic responsibilities, and a sense of well-being are the characteristics of employee engagement (Troy, 2013). Current literature suggests three factors that may adversely affect community college faculty job satisfaction and engagement: heavy workload, lack of student preparation, and perception of marginalization. A work environment containing conflicting demands and limited time contributes to, depression, isolation, and retreat from activities and commitments outside the classroom (Malm et al., 2013). The actions and behaviors of disengaged faculty are reflected in student outcomes, interpersonal relationships, and personal and institutional reputation (Outcalt, 2000).

Administrative support and a college culture that encourages professional development and interdepartmental collaboration promote faculty engagement. The creation and support of development opportunities for faculty have shown to have many benefits (Malm et al., 2013). Release time, administrative support, interacting with colleagues outside their area of expertise, and participating in professional development increase faculty job satisfaction and fosters involvement beyond ones job description (Jackson, Stebleton, & Laanan, 2013; Lightner & Sipple, 2013).

## **Learning Communities**

Lightner and Sipple (2013) define learning communities involving faculty as “voluntary formal groups of interdisciplinary faculty who meet regularly to work on scholarly projects about the profession of learning” (p. 455). Troy (2013) expands this definition, to include member engagement organized around a curriculum concerned with enhancing teaching and learning, supported by activities that provide development and community building. Community college administrative support of learning communities can mitigate faculty feelings of isolation and encourage greater faculty engagement.

Learning communities, supported professional development and increased scholarship benefit the faculty member, college, and students (Jackson et al., 2013). Community college administration can encourage engagement and enhanced motivation in both adjunct and full time faculty by creating and supporting learning communities (Lightner & Sipple, 2013; Malm et al., 2013). Faculty members who feel accepted and supported may be motivated to become more involved in other areas in the institution (Jackson et al., 2013) and reinvigorated in the classroom (Lightner & Sipple, 2013).

### **Benefits of Learning Community Participation**

Learning communities may reduce feelings of isolation and encourage a higher level of faculty involvement; they have been shown to build trust and establish a sense of relatedness and commitment (Daly, 2011; Lightner & Sipple, 2013). Interaction with faculty from different areas of the college through learning communities can lessen the challenges brought about by isolation. Such interdisciplinary interaction through sharing of responsibilities, collaboration, feedback and support with other faculty members creates a sense of community, belonging and support (Daly, 2011; Jackson et al., 2013; Outcalt, 2000). Faculty job satisfaction and engagement increases in a welcoming, connected, and supportive environment.

### **Barriers to Learning Community Participation**

Learning communities in a community college setting are not always embraced by faculty. Increased demand on limited time, little reward for professional development, and fear of losing autonomy are a few areas of concern (Dickinson, 1999; Lightner & Sipple, 2013). Community college faculty believe they have high autonomy because they control their classroom but express concern that this will be lessened by participation in learning communities (Kim et al., 2008). Building a climate based on openness and trust may increase the benefits of participation in learning communities and address concerns of both faculty and administration.

### **Conclusion**

Community college faculty work in an environment with a focus on teaching a diverse and often unprepared student population, resulting in heavy workloads and resultant isolation and the perception of less respect than afforded their colleagues at four year colleges. These stressors often lead to decreased job satisfaction and disengagement. Relationships and information sharing cultivated through faculty learning communities provide support overscheduled and overwhelmed community college faculty.

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