

Faculty Inquiry in Action: Guidelines for Working Together to Improve Student Learning *

How do my students learn? Where are they stumbling? Where are they succeeding?

Such questions are more than a passing curiosity for teachers engaged in faculty inquiry.

Faculty inquiry is a form of professional development by which teachers identify and investigate questions about their students' learning. The inquiry process is ongoing, informed by evidence of student learning, and undertaken in a collaborative setting. Findings from the process come back to the classroom in the form of new curricula, new assessments, and new pedagogies, which in turn become subjects for further inquiry.

When faculty pursue such inquiry in the company of colleagues and students, they begin to create a "teaching commons" on their campus—a set of interconnected forums where conversations about learning take place, where innovations in curriculum and pedagogy get tried out, and where questions and answers about education are exchanged, critiqued, and built upon.

As an example of the larger scholarship of teaching and learning movement, faculty inquiry has the potential to transform higher education by making the private work of the classroom visible, studied, talked about, and valued—conditions for ongoing improvement in any enterprise.

1. The Power of Inquiry: Challenging Questions and Powerful Evidence

As part of faculty inquiry, teachers closely examine student learning in order to understand how to make learning environments more effective. In other words, the inquiry process regards the challenges of teaching as topics worthy of serious intellectual examination.

For example, faculty inquiry might focus on questions like the following:

- *How does my students' writing change when they participate in a learning community that links an English composition class with a class in history or anthropology?*
- *What are the most important concepts in the algebra course? What do students need to know to go on to the next mathematics course and how can we be sure they know it?*
- *How many students start in basic skills and successfully reach transfer level courses? What is the typical pattern of progress? If students stop out, do they come back?*

To answer such questions, a faculty inquiry group might explore and analyze a variety of evidence, ranging from fine grained observations in the classroom to data about campus-level trends. Examples of evidence include the following:

- Classroom assignments with examples of student work across different sections of a class
- A series of "think alouds" where students talk through their thought process while solving a problem
- Student interviews, focus groups, surveys or reflective essays
- Campus data about patterns of student success, retention, and persistence

2. The Power of Community: Inquiry as a Collaborative Process of Improvement

Teaching can be a lonely experience. Working behind closed classroom doors, educators may not know if the challenges they face are shared or idiosyncratic, whether their standards of grading and attendance are too demanding or too lax. An ongoing professional conversation can open the doors to the classroom and magnify the work of individuals. A Faculty Inquiry Group (FIG) offers powerful advantages:

Working with others in the department or program - Collaborative inquiry provides an opportunity for faculty to acknowledge common challenges and search together for solutions. Inquiry may focus on curricular development and on articulating explicit outcomes to shape course design. Members of a FIG may design and analyze common final examinations, or develop a portfolio system for assessing outcomes over time. Such work can strengthen the content and continuity of a course or sequence of courses.

Working with others around a new teaching model or approach - Inquiry groups may form around the implementation of new classroom approaches such as learning communities, the use of technology in the classroom, or reading across the disciplines. Participants in FIGs feel able to take risks and experiment with new ideas in their classrooms.

Working with educators in a variety of roles across the campus - Student support personnel, counselors, and institutional researchers may join FIGs and bring new perspectives to the process. Such interdisciplinary inquiry groups can help break down silos across campus and create a network of relationships and trust. Faculty inquiry groups are powerful settings for sharing diverse perspectives, experiences, and resources.

3. Suggestions for Starting and Supporting a Faculty Inquiry Group

Inviting Participation

- Start with topics and questions that matter in the classroom. Think strategically about who can contribute to the conversation.
- Invite participation widely, including adjunct faculty.
- Involve institutional researchers and others who bring important data and perspectives from beyond the individual classroom.
- Designate a group leader who can foster candid exchange, reinforce the importance of evidence, and keep the group moving toward its shared goals.

Shaping the Conversation

Student learning is always the primary focus of inquiry. Start the conversation by looking closely at examples of student work and by listening to student voices.

- Identify a shared question, goal, or purpose. Doing so can strengthen the group and increase the likelihood that new insights will travel across classrooms and settings.
- Think about the range of evidence and data that can inform the group's questions and deliberations. Bring evidence into the discussion early in the inquiry process.
- Look outward to the research literature and to the work of others.
- Document what is done and learned so that others can build on it.

Providing Support

- Schedule and protect time for faculty to meet and work together on inquiry projects. Time is a precious commodity on any campus.
- Build respect and trust in the group so that differing perspectives are valued. Nurture and feed people—physically, emotionally, and intellectually.
- Recognize and provide opportunities for emerging leadership in teaching and learning.

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