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The Design Process

Designing Discipline-Specific Adjunct Faculty Learning Communities at Boise State University

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- **Design team reflected partnership between CTL staff, department/program leaders, and an instructional designer for the online program.**
- **Design team established clear goals for localizing the existing AFLC to guide the design team's work.**
- **Design team created consistency through these goals while allowing for flexibility in AFLC program design based on the departmental/program context.**
- **Localized AFLCs supported part-time participants' development of instructional effectiveness and a sense of belonging.**

Background

Boise State University is a public doctoral research institution located in Boise, Idaho, with an enrollment of approximately 26,000 students. Boise State is one of the largest universities in the state of Idaho and awards baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degrees for a variety of subjects. Of the approximately 1,400 faculty members at Boise State, 76% are in VITAL[1] (contingent) positions, including 43% part-time and 33% full-time.

The Adjunct Faculty Learning Community (AFLC) is a program offered by the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) that provides a semester-long format for adjunct faculty to engage in sustained learning and connection with their peers. As part of the AFLC, participants attend four meetings during the semester, engage in two workshops of their choice offered by the CTL, participate in a midsemester classroom assessment to get formative feedback from students, and write a reflection on a new teaching activity that they try as part of the AFLC. The AFLC is facilitated by CTL staff.

[1] We use the term VITAL faculty — an asset-based term— to refer to contingent or non-tenure track faculty (including visiting faculty, instructors, adjuncts, lecturers, research faculty, and clinical faculty) as a way to affirm their vital role within institutions.

While this model had been successful in general, there was some evidence that adjunct interest was waning, as there have been fewer adjuncts participating during recent semesters. One potential issue that the AFLC coordinator identified was that the interdisciplinary cohort design sometimes made conversations about content challenging. AFLC participants also tended to come from certain disciplines more than others, which presented an opportunity to increase the reach of the program. Based on these issues, the coordinator considered the potential to create an adaptable framework for more "local" implementation of the AFLC that could be adopted by any interested programs and departments on campus. To achieve this goal, the coordinator invited two programs to engage in collaborative planning and then pilot the AFLC in their discipline-specific environments: the School of Social Work's (SSW) Online Master's of Social Work (MSW) program and the Department of Mathematics.

Disciplinary Contexts

The School of Social Work offers an online MSW degree program with intensive courses taught over a seven week period. The instructors for the program are nearly all part-time faculty. The online faculty technology specialist in the school communicated CTL professional development opportunities with online faculty and had previously developed an orientation, workshops, and consultations to support their professional development. However, she noted that part-time faculty needed more opportunities for conversation and connections than these programs offered, especially because the program is entirely online. This also presented an opportunity to adapt the AFLC model for online modalities.

In the Math department, some introductory-level courses are regularly taught by new part-time faculty. To facilitate the success of part-time faculty and promote consistency in student learning across course sections, the department uses course coordinators to check in with section instructors a few times per semester. Department leaders also conduct teaching observations of the adjuncts. Because the department is committed to using active learning approaches to teach math, they developed a pre-semester workshop for faculty that helps provide an introduction to these pedagogies. Recognizing that one workshop isn't enough, they identified the AFLC as an opportunity to extend the learning and conversations that occur in the pre-workshop, and as a way to help part-time faculty identify and prepare for specific content areas that students tend to find challenging.

Design Team Process

To plan and implement the Disciplinary-AFLCs (D-AFLCs), the AFLC coordinator organized a design team composed of representatives from all three of these contexts. In addition to the coordinator, who is also an associate director for educational development, design team members included a CTL program coordinator, an online faculty technology specialist in the School of Social Work, the chair of the Math department, and the associate chair of the Math department, who has previously been an active participant and facilitator of CTL programs.

They held their initial meeting in spring, 2022. The CTL associate director created a shared Google doc for the meeting agenda and notes. The agenda focused on discussing the CTL framework for the AFLC, considering how it could be adapted for each context, and creating a structure for continuing the design work. During the meeting, the associate director described the AFLC structure and activities and presented the need for tailoring based on the culture of each department/program. They agreed that there would be similar time commitments expected of participants across contexts, including 3-4 synchronous meetings; that all participants would be compensated for completing expectations; and that they would recruit participants at the end of the spring semester. They also planned to use results of a faculty survey conducted in the spring to better understand the needs of the faculty in each context. In terms of continuing the design process, they agreed that the CTL staff would meet individually with the disciplinary team members during the next few months, with another full design team meeting during the summer to check in about progress, recruiting participants, etc.

Over the summer, the design team used the shared Google doc to document the development of the D-AFLCs in each of the three contexts. In the document, they created a table to identify each context's approaches and activities in order to create stronger alignment across contexts. The table included aspects of program design (e.g., purpose and objectives, group composition), implementation (e.g., activities, recruitment process), and mechanisms to achieve goals (e.g., participants' reflection about teaching, facilitator resources needed). They held a second design team meeting over the summer to share updates on their planning and recruitment and the design of their disciplinary AFLC. The team also discussed how they would evaluate the program's success in each context.

The D-AFLCs were implemented in each context during the fall semester. Toward the end of the semester, the D-AFLC coordinator scheduled a debrief meeting for team members to reflect on how the programs went and to discuss future plans. The staff member who had facilitated the CTL AFLC was also invited to participate in this meeting so that the discussion could be inclusive of all three contexts. The debrief invited representatives from each AFLC context (CTL, Math, Social Work) to reflect on what had been successful with the implementation of the program, what challenges they faced, and what the designers had learned from engaging in this project.

Design of the AFLCs

The following D-AFLC goals were standardized: the use of Mid-semester Assessment Process (MAP) from students, the number of meetings (at least three), and the execution of a spring recruitment for a fall program.

Recruitment for the MSW D-AFLC and Math D-AFLC was standardized. Interest was gauged before the fall semester started by administrators of the program. Then an email, indicating that the application for the program was live, was sent out to remind people to participate and to receive qualified applicants for the program.

Needs assessment was standardized in how the D-AFLCS identified and met the needs of the participants. Before a D-AFLC had its first fall-semester meeting, there was a faculty needs assessment survey administered in order to gauge the needs of each department's participants. These needs assessments examined the self-reported needs of the participants across multiple contexts. Once common needs were identified among the participants, the D-AFLCs adjusted their planned pedagogies to be tailored toward these needs. Compensation was also standardized with participants who fully meet the program's expectations receiving a $200 stipend and a letter of completion signed by the provost (which is shared with their department chair). The Math D-AFLC uses a slightly different compensation structure that uses a tiered system that rewards completion for tier one with $150 and tier two with $200.

From the broadest perspective, there was a high degree of standardization in the way the design team sought to create the Disciplinary AFLCs. The high-level view of the program would reveal two programs whose focus was largely the same.

Additionally, these D-AFLCs employed different modalities that were intentionally tailored to the needs of their respective departments. The MSW and Math D-AFLCs were a combination of synchronous and asynchronous modalities; meaning that it was delivered through a combination of online and in-person instruction, which sometimes required all participants to be in the same place at once and sometimes did not.

In the asynchronous online modalities, tools for participation included using Canvas, Google, and email (in some cases). The MSW used Canvas. The Math D-AFLC was innovative by using Google rather than Canvas since part-time faculty can't access Canvas until the semester has started. When some part-time faculty could not meet in person during the semester, the Math D-AFLC allowed email as a substitute.

In the synchronous modalities, meetings were held in person and online using Zoom. During synchronous Zoom meetings in the MSW D-AFLC, Perusal was used as a means for collaboration/commentary between the part-time faculty. In the synchronous modalities of the Math D-AFLC, collaboration and commentary were done in person.

Tailoring the MSW AFLC

The online MSW tailored the third goal for the D-AFLC to specify the objective for using the MAPs, stating *"3. How to use mid-course feedback to revise the course experience [using an existing structure and process (improve teaching effectiveness)."*

Additionally, in the MSW D-AFLC, administrators intentionally designed the D-AFLC to give participants the feeling of being students. The administrators chose to include a student-like use of asynchronous discussion boards along with their synchronous online meetings. Since the MSW degree program and the MSW D-AFLC are both entirely online, this helped participants understand the experiences of their own students engaging in online discussions.

The MSW D-AFLC had two facilitators — an instructional designer who would contribute expertise about technology and pedagogy and a faculty member who would be able to help with content.

The MSW D-AFLC was comprised of nine adjunct faculty and was more free-form in its structure. The D-FLC had three synchronous learning sessions; the topics of discussion were partly informed by faculty feedback throughout the semester. Participants also completed the mid-semester course assessment with their students.

In addition to these synchronous meetings, the D-FLC approached community building asynchronously too. MSW participants communicated with each other digitally on Canvas through discussion boards. MSW participants did this for five hours broken up throughout the semester.

MSW participants were assigned a reading list that included relevant articles on teaching and podcasts on teaching-related topics. This material was suggested rather than mandated and it encouraged participants to seek additional outside materials.

Through the MSW D-AFLC, participants established a teaching portfolio including the MAP, and after completion of the learning community they received credits toward learning/teaching certificates with eCampus. The portfolio contributes to evidence that documents an instructor's growth and development as an educator.

Tailoring the Math AFLC

The Math D-AFLC defines its goals in nearly identical terms to the MSW D-AFLC. However, there is a twist on the third goal, regarding using course feedback. The Math D-AFLC declared that it would set an objective for the use of peer observation as a means of providing feedback for participants.

The Math D-AFLC was composed of five adjunct faculty from across the Math department, representing a variety of math classes. The hybrid model of the MATH D-AFLC was structured in two tiers. In the first level, participants would complete an online module (two and a half hours) between July 18 and August 14, which, in part, was meant to help participants start setting up their class courses early. Then participants would attend a cohort meeting during the week before classes start; two hours in length. Next, they would observe at least one class taught by another Mathematics instructor during fall 2022 and complete a short reflection survey.

In the second level, participants would observe two additional classes during Fall 2022 and complete a short reflection survey after each. After this, participants would attend two additional cohort meetings during the semester — about an hour each — to collaborate on materials or procedures and to discuss experiences.

Good Practices in the Design Process

Team Composition

- The design team was inclusive of individuals with a diverse set of experiences, backgrounds, and positionality. The team leveraged the expertise of CTL staff members around educational development as well as disciplinary representatives who have a better understanding of department culture/climate and what faculty in those departments are expected to do with regard to teaching.
- The design team included representatives from multiple departments, programs, and offices, as well as a department chair. A cross-functional team can help keep projects on track through external accountability and support. Additionally, the inclusion of academic leaders can help create buy-in and support the sustainability of the program.

Team Priorities

- The team decided on common aspects of the program but allowed for departmental tailoring in order to accommodate customs and needs. This was done to ensure AFLCs do not vary wildly in the experience of participants.

Team Process

- From the beginning of the design process, there was a high degree of deliberativeness and intentionality in the design process. This was evident in their use of meeting agendas, shared documents, and a commitment to engage with one another over time. This encouraged a clear, logical, and orderly progression from one step in the team process to the other.
- Meeting agendas made sure that meetings moved along and that key topics were addressed.
- During the first meeting, the CTL associate director presented her objectives for moving the AFLCs into disciplinary spaces: to create space for adjunct faculty:

    1. Engage in dialogue about their teaching with colleagues teaching similar content (improve teaching effectiveness);
    2. Connect with each other as department colleagues (support a sense of belonging); and
    3. Get feedback on their teaching beyond the end of course evaluations (improve teaching effectiveness).

    These clearly articulated goals helped lay a clear groundwork for later decision-making.

- Following the associate director's established goals, each program then shared information about their disciplinary context, current professional development activities, and how they were thinking about their disciplinary-AFLC. The team then discussed how to create consistency across programs while also allowing for tailoring based on the culture of the department/program. This allowed administrators and each program to be aware of what each D-AFLC was doing and to work together in a collaborative process.
- The team developed processes to get to desired goals. This entailed identifying a desired outcome and then creating a series of steps to get there. One example of this can be found in the Math department D-AFLC. Math wanted participants to engage in a dialogue about their teaching with colleagues, so they developed a process to forward them toward that goal by requiring participants to do peer observations and discussions.
- The design team members from the CTL checked in with the disciplinary team members throughout the duration of the program. This promoted continuity from the planning stage through each stage of execution.

Evaluation of Program Success

- The team engaged in a debrief meeting near the end of the semester to reflect on their experiences. Debriefs at the completion of the AFLC helped designers find patterns among the successes and challenges experienced in each context, encouraged learning across contexts, and allowed for evaluation of what could be done better next time.
- The team conducted a needs assessment of potential participants across multiple contexts to help determine what participants needed and to help designers understand how to meet participant's needs.
- The team administered surveys to AFLC participants before and after participation to evaluate the success of each AFLC.

Program Successes

The design team identified a number of ways that the planning process and resulting programs were successful.

Achieving Program Goals

- The Math department was pleased with the outcomes of the pilot and has already agreed to fund the program again next fall.
- A design team member commented that while their success in achieving program objectives seemed to happen organically during implementation, it was actually that their intentional design process created a strong foundation for reaching these goals.

- A design team member described one participant's strong appreciation for the opportunity to engage in conversations around teaching, reflecting that the D-AFLC contributed to a growth-oriented culture in their program.
- Design team members identified significant benefits stemming from the collaboration of people with disciplinary content expertise with people who have expertise in educational development and instructional technology. This allowed team members to use individual strengths and saved a lot of time and effort.

Promoting Instructional Effectiveness

- The semester-long program created a sense of concentrated focus and continuing conversation among the cohorts. Facilitators also reported that participants felt some urgency to try new pedagogies quickly so that they could discuss them with program peers. This urgency and concentration may be more difficult to sustain in yearlong programs.
- Peer observations of teaching were cited as a powerful tool to help instructors think differently about content and pedagogy.

Creating Community and Belonging

- Having facilitators with shared professional identities was cited as an important contributor to belonging. In the D-AFLCs, facilitators were credited with having a stronger sense of the needs of their participants because they were embedded in the discipline. In the CTL AFLC, the facilitator is also an adjunct and discussed how this contributed to setting realistic expectations and goals for participants.
- The use of both synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for conversation in Social Work was identified as being particularly powerful for creating connections among participants.
- In one program, participants scheduled a "post-party" to discuss their course evaluations together after the D-AFLC concluded.

Lessons Learned

The design team also identified challenges they experienced and lessons they learned. Implementation is always an opportunity to identify ways that practices and processes can be improved in the future.

Realistic Expectations for the Work of Planning

- Disciplinary design team members had to engage in a lot of work to set up the D-AFLCs, including tasks like creating program structures, finding content, announcing the opportunity, and processing applications. This work was done without compensation and generally without release from any of their other responsibilities.

- They also discussed that the assumptions they made in establishing program timelines created challenges. For instance, one design team member said that they had underestimated the length of time it would take for faculty to complete applications after the opportunity was announced.

Balancing Program Goals and Participant Needs

- The School of Social Work struggled to find times when all participants could meet, so they ended up holding multiple iterations of the same meeting. Additionally, participants indicated that weekends would be ideal for meetings given their other responsibilities, but in practice weekend meetings were very sparsely attended. The Math department faced similar issues with scheduling meetings. They allowed participants to join in-person meetings by Zoom if necessary, and in some cases, the facilitator held an email conversation with an individual who could not meet at the scheduled time. These attempts to meet participants' needs creates significant burdens for the facilitator.
- Designers from the Math department also noted that some part-time faculty faced challenges trying to schedule peer observations of multiple colleagues given their other responsibilities.
- Several design team members discussed the tension between holding face-to-face meetings, which they perceived to be more powerful for building community, and holding meetings online, which were more convenient for participants. The significant increase in online meetings during the pandemic may have also shifted faculty's perceptions of and preferences for online interactions, and this dynamic is one that many campus leaders are currently wrestling with.
- Both D-AFLCs used individuals who hold supervisory roles as program facilitators. While this choice can foster relationship-building for part-time faculty, a design team member also commented that participants may not have felt comfortable being totally honest and open because of the power differences.
- The Math department ran out of time during the spring semester to recruit participants, so they waited until August. While this timeline was more inclusive of part-time faculty, since they are often hired at the last minute, it may have also deterred some participants who could have planned around the D-AFLC if they had received more advanced notice.

Setting Clear Expectations for Participants

- One design team member described how sometimes participants interpreted activities differently than intended, reflecting on the importance of making the objectives and instructions of activities clear. The team then discussed the opportunity to increase transparency by stating D-AFLC objectives explicitly and then connecting activities to these.
- Several design team members expressed some ambiguity around how to define program completion when compensation is involved. They discussed the importance of having a backup plan when a participant has a family emergency, for instance, or when they do not turn in a final reflection.

Design Summary

- **Purpose and Objectives:** Dialogue has been initiated between part-time faculty. Part-time faculty feel a greater sense of community. Part-time faculty and others report improvements in teaching.
- **Participants:** Each discipline had 5-10 adjunct faculty participate.
- **Delivery Mode:** Both online and in-person (Math); Entirely online (SSW).
- **Structure and Length:** 3-4 meetings held throughout the semester with varying degrees of asynchronous engagement and assignments interspersed throughout.
- **Content:** Determined by the needs of the group.
- **Facilitation:** Facilitated by leadership in the D-AFLC, the Math department, and the School of Social Work.
- **Deliverables:** All programs had part-time faculty complete MAPs. In the Math department, participants had peer observations were finished with a short reflection survey after each. In the SSW, participants had written and video discussion board posts.
- **Assessment:** Pre-program survey, post-program surveys, reflections and student feedback, end of program debrief.
- **Compensation and Recognition:** $200-$300 and a letter from the provost sent to the department chair.

Visit the **Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success** website for more case studies of professional development that is accessible and welcoming of VITAL faculty and a wide range of resources and toolkits to better support them.

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