

New Faculty Learning Community as Retention Tool for Underrepresented Minorities

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The University of Wisconsin – Platteville College of Engineering, Math and Science (EMS) created a New Faculty and Academic Staff Learning Center (NFLC) in the Fall of 2014. Objectives of the NFLC include: providing just-in-time university and college orientation, building a support system for new faculty and staff, assisting faculty and academic staff with acclimation to life in rural Wisconsin, and promoting retention of women and underrepresented minority students. All new faculty and academic staff in the college are invited and encouraged to participate in this voluntary community. The dean of the college extends a personal invitation to each participant, department chairs support this effort by reinforcing the message and arranging faculty teaching schedules to not conflict during the meeting times, and the NFLC activities are selected to directly benefit the participants' careers at UW-Platteville. Participants are encouraged to apply for internal start-up grants supporting retention of women and underrepresented minorities, which exposes them to issues surrounding women in engineering. The NFLC programming is developed in coordination with the College's Women in Engineering Program. This intentional approach prepares new faculty to become allies in the retention effort. Work/life balance issues are discussed throughout the year, and several activities involve the families of the new faculty and staff, including a community parade and a dinner reception hosted by local business leaders. This paper discusses the logistics of building such a community, and best practices that have made it successful on the UW-Platteville campus. Factors contributing to success include: gaining buy-in from key campus administrators, using mid-level faculty as NFLC coordinators, funding course release/overload compensation for each faculty coordinator, having campus administrators regularly reaffirm the benefits of participating in the NFLC, and implementing changes based upon participant feedback.

1 Introduction

Hiring a new faculty member is an expensive proposition, and requires the even more costly currency of faculty time. Retaining new faculty reduces the frequency of search and screens. Friendlier work-life policies can help retain faculty and in particular underrepresented faculty (1) (2), but require high-level institutional support and financing to implement. Mentorship and sustained orientation can also help faculty become more productive at a faster rate (3) (4). The College of Engineering, Math and Science (College of EMS) at University of Wisconsin – Platteville (UW-Platteville) established a New Faculty Learning Community (NFLC) in 2014 as an inexpensive attempt to retain new faculty and improve new

faculty productivity, and to introduce new faculty to best practices for promoting underrepresented minorities (URM) retention. The NFLC was initially funded by a small amount of NSF grant funds. Since that time, the NFLC has gained cultural acceptance within the College of EMS. The NFLC will be fully institutionalized and supported by EMS funds at the start of the 2017-2018 academic year, and has begun to spread campus-wide. Because this program is inexpensive to set up and has been assessed as highly productive, the authors believe similar setups could be instituted at other universities and colleges. This paper provides a narrative of the inception, implementation, and institutionalization of the NFLC in the Background section, and the Roadmap section identifies key best practices and recommendations for implementation at other institutions.

2 Background

In industry, companies with a strong, long-term onboarding process have been found to increase new hire retention by 82% (5). Furthermore, a longer-term orientation helps new hires acclimate and have a more positive association with the institution than a short introductory orientation (5). In response to this challenge, the College developed a new faculty learning community with the goals of increasing faculty retention, and to acquainting faculty with on-campus tools to promote more rapid productivity. In supporting these goals, three outcomes were identified:

1. Help faculty and academic staff develop pedagogical techniques and tools
2. Provide a just-in-time orientation
3. Build a support system / community for new faculty and academic staff

These outcomes are achieved with a focus on promoting retention of URM. Outcomes 1 and 2 support the goal of increasing new faculty and staff productivity by providing content that specifically targets best practices as implemented at the university, in a time frame beneficial to the participants. For instance, advising is discussed approximately two weeks prior to advising starting on campus, so that faculty and staff are able to implement ideas discussed during that session.

Outcome 3 is a somewhat more nebulous outcome to measure, and yet arguably just as important if not more so than outcomes 1 and 2. A faculty member's sense of belonging, both within the university and within the local area, affects their commitment to the university, and thus the retention of said faculty. This is particularly true when it comes to perceptions of the work place's commitment to work-life balance (6). However, the faculty members' significant others are also included in this effort, as unhappy family members can also contribute to unsuccessful retention (7) (8). To address outcome 3, a mixture

of interactive, social, and community-building activities are offered on a weekly basis within the NFLC, as well as occasional after-hours events that include families.

2.1 Inception

In March, 2014, the College of EMS experienced a large turnover of senior tenured faculty, with one department losing 20% of its faculty. The remaining faculty were overwhelmed with the prospect of increased service load on top of new faculty mentoring. A grant team focused on URM student retention explored support options for the new faculty and discovered that a faculty training program at Sacramento State had been successful. The purpose of that group was to help faculty learn technological tools to improve student learning. Participants were given a small, \$1000 stipend to purchase hardware and software, or to engage in conference travel/attendance (9). Given their success, this program inspired collaborators to create a faculty learning community program on a modest budget. The facilitators who developed this program were recently tenured and did not hold any administrative positions. They knew that participation would be dependent on the perceived value of the community rather than any sort of power dynamic associated with institutional hierarchy. Therefore, the community was built on the premise that if the facilitators have no vote on retention and tenure decisions at large, they can be a confidential, external guide. There is no one to impress in the community, so faculty can let their guard down and build relationships with each other. The following sections describe how the facilitators laid the groundwork for a successful NFLC, from setting up the budget, to establishing a welcoming environment, to securing administrative and cultural acceptance.

2.1.1 Budget

The NFLC program was introduced toward the end of an NSF-sponsored grant, in a university climate of ongoing and increasing budget cuts from the state. In order to achieve success, the NFLC programming had to come with a small price tag and show measurable, significant outcomes. This placed the focus of the NFLC on assisting faculty to access campus resources more effectively, rather than generating new sources of faculty funds.

The cost of running the NFLC is limited to one-credit course overloads for each of the two co-coordinators, and refreshments for some meetings. Compensation for the coordinators allows the university to expect accountability, and thus, quality programming and assessment of the community. Refreshments provide a small bit of hospitality on the part of the university. In total, the annual budget is approximately \$6,500, for a program that affects upward of 20 faculty and academic staff annually.

Faculty participants see more benefits; for example, there are (independent of the NFLC) modest start-up packages that new faculty access through an internal grant process. The start-up packages are open to all new faculty, but those who attend the NFLC programming are able to share and refine their ideas in the space afforded by the community. In short, it behooves a new faculty member to attend these meetings so they can write a stronger proposal.

Faculty are also introduced to best practices for retaining URMs and scholarship in that area through collaboration with the Student Success Programs (SSP) department. The director of the SSP has pledged to match any start-up package that addresses URM retention issues. Moreover, the director of the SSP meets with the NFLC to discuss best practices related to the retention of URM students.

2.1.2 Providing a Welcoming Environment

From its inception, the NFLC was intended to be a “safe space” for new faculty to communicate struggles and concerns. Intentional efforts have been made to create a welcoming environment. Facilitators begin each meeting by inquiring about participants’ experiences or trepidations related to the topic of the day. This provides an encouraging atmosphere for faculty who need support, and also gives the new faculty the opportunity to provide support to each other. This give and take is what builds a sense of belonging. This is an effective form of engagement, as the faculty without teaching obligations after the meeting stay to continue this discussion.

With the development of a safe space in mind, two mid-level faculty with no administrative duties, and hence no influence on retention and tenure decisions, were selected to coordinate the community. While this decision preserves the freedom within the community to voice concerns, the trade-off is a lack of authority coming from recognized campus leaders.

2.1.3 Gaining Cultural Acceptance

To address the lack of authority from the NFLC coordinators, campus leaders are routinely updated on the community’s activities, their involvement is solicited, and their support is requested in an intentional manner. With reminders of the outcomes the community is supporting,

- The dean is asked to send a short (pre-written by coordinators) email to
 - 1) new faculty, inviting them to participate
 - 2) department chairs, asking them to encourage participation in the NFLC

- 3) department chairs, reminding them to not schedule new faculty and academic staff (and coordinators) to teach during the NFLC meeting times
- Campus leaders, such as the dean, the provost, and assistant deans, are each invited to attend a meeting of the NFLC. This provides several benefits:
 - 1) Participants have the opportunity to meet in an intimate yet unthreatening environment with campus leaders and see the humanity behind the job titles,
 - 2) Campus leaders are able to get to know new faculty and academic staff in an efficient yet informal manner, and
 - 3) Campus leaders are able to directly engage with the NFLC and see how it works toward meeting the stated outcomes.

Because the NFLC coordinators are asking for small favors from administrators, with big benefits, the NFLC has been able to thus far gain ground toward institutionalization, which is discussed in the Implementation section.

2.2 Implementation

Because the facilitators could not require new faculty and academic staff to participate, which the facilitators agree is the best course of action, they set out to build a community on the premise of voluntary participation. For it to be successful, participants would need to value the NFLC as a positive contribution toward their own productivity, and understand that this activity is supported by the administration.

Because this started as a small pilot program, facilitators did not have the political capital to reserve a common time for all new faculty and facilitators. As a result, the meeting times for the 2014-2016 NFLC were selected via a Doodle poll to accommodate as many peoples' schedules as possible. As a consequence, meetings were often early morning, changed from semester to semester, and not everyone could attend even at that.

The approach to scheduling meetings is discussed in the Activities section, and data collection methodologies are discussed in the Assessment Plan and Results section.

2.2.1 Activities

The NFLC held weekly meetings during the semester for the faculty. Each meeting was structured to address one of the three outcomes, and the outcome addressed was rotated regularly. A schedule for the Spring 2017 semester is presented in Table 1 to illustrate this. In order to address outcome 1, on-campus speakers were invited to discuss specific topics, such as creating instructional videos, active learning techniques, and the learning management system. Sessions addressing outcome 2 included just-in-time orientation. Speakers addressed advising right before advising season, retention file prior to their due date, and undergraduate research before an internal undergraduate research grant was due. The meetings specifically addressed outcome 3 by having occasional socials with no scheduled speaker. For these occasions, food and beverages were procured, and the facilitators prompted discussion with a topical question (“so, how’s the semester going? What is your biggest challenge right now?”)

Table 1: The Spring 2017 Syllabus as a Sample Schedule

Date	Activity	Outcome
1/25	University-wide Meeting – Nonacademic Misconduct	2
2/1	Undergraduate Research	1
2/8	Strength Finder	1
2/15	Platteville Main Street Group	2
2/22	University-wide Meeting – Scholarship of Teaching and Learning	1
3/1	Social with Provost	3
3/8	Academic Advising	2
3/15	WEPAN Webinar	2
3/22	Interpersonal Communication Strategies	1
3/29	University-wide Meeting – Panel on Learning Theory and Assessment	1
4/5	Service Discussion	2
4/12	Professional Development / Scholarly Activity Discussion	1
4/19	Tips on Flipping the Classroom	1
4/26	Solidarity in the classroom	1
5/3	University-wide Meeting – Grill out	3
5/10	End of semester social	3

The NFLC also aims to help the family’s acclimation. To that end, a few after-hours events were scheduled. Participants in the NFLC meet up to attend a local parade on a Saturday morning in September. In collaboration with the local business council, the Platteville Main Street Group, the NFLC hosts a dinner for all new faculty and their families. This provides an opportunity for families to interact with each other as well as community leaders, and to receive information about activities, organizations, and businesses in the area. A meet-up was attempted for a few sporting events, but that ended up not

being a popular idea. Facilitators also pass along community events to participants: special activities at the library for children, local farmers market, etc.

2.2.2 *Assessment Plan and Results*

Attendance was noted for each meeting so that trends could be examined. Two surveys, presented in Appendices 1 and 2, were developed. The biannual survey (Appendix 1) is administered every fall and spring. Every new faculty and academic staff member, regardless of participation in the NFLC, is invited to participate in this anonymous survey. An invitation to participate in an anonymous post survey (Appendix 2) is given at the end of their second year at UW-Platteville, as former new faculty are submitting documents for their third year review. Additionally, grant-funding is tracked and compared to new faculty from previous years. Retention rates are also tracked. However, since there are so few individuals that are eligible to participate in any given year, grant funding and retention data are perhaps more reflective of the unique differences between each participant rather than a true measure of the program's impact.

During the inaugural 2014/2015 academic year the EMS NFLC met 23 times and averaged seven participants per meeting (from a pool of 27 new faculty and academic staff). There were 17 unique participants, and 15 faculty and staff participated in two or more meetings. During the 2015/2016 academic year, the EMS NFLC met 22 times and averaged four participants per meeting (from a pool of 13 new faculty and academic staff). There were 8 unique participants, and 7 faculty and staff participated in two or more meetings.

Feedback from participating faculty during the first two years was overwhelmingly positive. Of the new faculty and staff that responded to the anonymous biannual assessment surveys (see Appendix 1 and 2), 96.7% of participants would recommend the learning community to other new faculty and staff. Furthermore, during the 2015/2016 academic year, 100% of respondents found that the learning community provided an introduction to resources available at UW-Platteville; 100% of respondents found that the learning community helped them acclimate to the wider Platteville community; and 100% of respondents found that the learning community provided a supportive environment as they acclimated to UW-Platteville. A representative sampling of anonymous comments from the surveys include:

- "I thought all of the topics were of interest and helpful. In general, I thought there was a nice atmosphere where I felt free to ask questions like "hey, what should I do about...?" "

- “I am so glad we have NFLC, which made me feel welcomed. It also helped with technical questions and tips on how to adjust myself to this new job, new location, etc.”
- “ ... it shows a warm welcome of UWP to new faculty. We are a family and together we will provide a fantastic education to students at UWP.”
- “Two primary aspects of the meetings were useful: practical information about procedures, events, and policies that new faculty don't know about or need more information; also, opportunities to build relationships with key individuals on campus.”
- “The NFLC provided a much-needed avenue for developing professional peer relationships”
- “Overall the program is excellent and has certainly smoothed my transition to working here at UWP. This program should be continued and expanded.”

During the first two years of operation, one prominent reason faculty cited for not attending NFLC was scheduling conflicts. However, the success of the NFLC has generated support among the College community, and effective Fall 2016, department chairs have now committed to reserving Wednesday's at noon for all new faculty and academic staff.

2.3 Institutionalization

As noted in the Budget section, the NFLC has an annual operational cost of approximately \$6500, which was initially supported by grant funds. With the grant coming to an end, the NFLC has been absorbed into institutional budgeting. Funds for refreshments were immediately volunteered by the dean's office, and the facilitators were able to negotiate a 1-credit overload for their coordination efforts. The provost's office, in particular, is invested in not only the College of EMS NFLC, but in expanding it to the other two colleges. As part of this effort, the provost has funded the development and implementation of a university-wide new faculty series to address issues common to faculty across the three colleges and to promote interdisciplinary communication. For the 2017-2018 academic year a 0.25 FTE release will be provided to support a university-wide NFLC coordinator position. The coordinator responsibilities will include university-wide programming, coordinating with the three colleges to ensure quality programming, and overall program assessment. Additionally, coordinators for the EMS NFLC will be mentoring coordinators from the two other colleges as they build their own NFLC for the 2017-2018 academic year.

3 Roadmap: Tips for Success in Developing a NFLC

The NFLC has been a successful program at UW-Platteville, capitalizing on the unique strengths and challenges faced by the institution. However, not everything done here would make sense for other institutions. Those with heavy research expectations, for example, may need to provide more incentive in the way of larger internal grant availability for participation, or fully catered lunches, to convince faculty to take time from their daily schedule. Universities in large urban areas may not be able to tap into community leaders' time as easily. That being said, there are common themes that we believe are best practices to consider when forming a new faculty learning community. The following sections discuss best practices during the planning and implementation phases.

3.1 Inception

Establishing a fully functioning NFLC requires thoughtful planning. This section highlights best practices to consider during the planning phase.

- *Develop a clear mission statement and outcomes:* A successful venture should start with a clearly articulated mission and measurable outcomes. The facilitators should frequently refer back to the mission and outcomes to provide direction as they choose activities.
- *Choose facilitators strategically:* Facilitate the NFLC with two midlevel faculty coming from distinct academic units, having diverse experiences. It is advantageous to choose facilitators not serving in other administrative roles, as it allows new faculty members the freedom to voice concerns without the fear of consequences to future tenure and retention decisions.
- *Obtain buy-in from campus administrators:* Seek participation from deans, chairs, and the provost's office. Keep the requests concrete and easy ("Would you be willing and able to attend for half an hour on X date to meet and greet?" "Would you please forward this (already written) email inviting new faculty to attend the NFLC?") This allows administrators to see what is happening and shows participants that the community is seen and valued by campus administration.
- *Leverage partnerships:* Look for ways to make connections with other offices and programs on campus. Work with teaching and technology centers, student success programs, dean of student's offices, local city councils, etc. to provide programming and opportunities for the new faculty participants. At UW-Platteville, the College of EMS Student Success Program director will match funds for new faculty start up packages which address URM issues.

- *Establish a common meeting time:* Work with deans and program chairs to determine a time that can be reserved for new faculty to participate in the NFLC. Otherwise, it may be impossible to find a time that works for all new faculty. As a result, some interested faculty may be unable to attend, and others, who may be moderately interested, may not attend due to an inconvenient meeting time. Establishing a common meeting time may require patience and positive assessment results to gain the necessary buy-in.
- *Voluntary participation through relevant and timely programming:* Build the community on the premise of voluntary participation. Because of the voluntary nature of participation, new faculty members need to value the NFLC as a positive contribution toward their productivity. If you provide programming that faculty value, they will attend. Plan your schedule in advance. Just as you would plan your tentative day-to-day schedule for a new course, a schedule of events helps ensure that you are addressing your outcomes on a regular basis.
- *Develop an assessment plan:* A concrete assessment plan should be established to determine what works and what needs to be changed. Each outcome should be assessed in a measurable and specific way. As part of the assessment plan development, reach out to assessment experts at your institution.

3.2 Implementation

As discussed in the inception section, obtaining buy-in from campus leaders and key units/departments across your campus is essential to get your program off the ground. This section highlights best practices to get your program up and running.

- *Nonthreatening environment:* An opt-in approach allows faculty to engage with the NFLC as they build confidence in the community. Facilitators without administrative roles can help build that confidence by creating a welcoming environment where faculty members feel valued and secure. The atmosphere should be ‘informal, yet informative’.
- *Constant communication:* In order to be successful, facilitators need to remain in constant communication with the participants. For each individual meeting, facilitators should send a calendar request, a friendly reminder the day before the meeting, and a meeting recap the day after the meeting. Despite your best efforts, not all new faculty will be able to attend. By sending a summarizing email with links to resources afterwards, even nonparticipants will be able to see the value the community provides.

- *Bring former participants back:* Remain in contact with former participants. When it comes to new faculty, they have the most relevant experience. Invite them to join the NFLC and share their experiences. Topics that have been particularly successful include: meet and greet with previous new faculty, discussion of service and scholarship expectations, and developing a retention, salary, and tenure file.
- *Nonmonetary incentives:* For most colleges and universities, it will not be possible to provide financial start-up packages tied to new faculty member participation. With this in mind, think of small items that have the potential to make a large impact. Invite your institution's grant officer to share insights into successful grant writing. Coordinate with program chairs to make sure that participation in the NFLC is viewed favorably as part of a faculty member's review process.
- *Have fun:* New faculty should enjoy the meetings and the overall experience. With this in mind, schedule occasional meetings with no speakers. At UW-Platteville, refreshments are provided and a discussion is prompted by the facilitator. Some discussions are serious, but most are relaxed and revolve around acclimating to the area or upcoming social events. It is also important to involve families and significant others. Organize 'after-hour' events so that participants and their families are able to build more meaningful relationships.
- *Perform meaningful assessment:* No program can be successful without assessment. Solicit feedback from the new faculty and have the flexibility to change the schedule as needed to meet their needs.

The relationships built through the NFLC shouldn't end after the first year. Participants should leave having established a network of 'friendly faces', allies to rely upon throughout their careers. It is recommended that reunion-type meetings be scheduled for the graduated cohorts. Former participants can also be tapped to talk to future cohorts about what to expect in the second year. Set up correctly, this can start a cultural shift towards a more collaborative college environment.

4 Conclusions

The College of EMS at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville established a New Faculty Learning Community for all first year academic staff and faculty as a way to increase retention, improve productivity and to promote awareness of issues surrounding underrepresented minorities. The program runs on a modest budget of \$6500 a year, and the success of the program has led to institutionalization within the university, and an expansion of the program to the other two colleges. The authors believe this type of approach could be successful at other institutions by following the

guiding principles of providing a small overload to each of two nonadministrative facilitators, having voluntary but gently encouraged participation of new faculty, and ensuring quality programming of an informal but informative nature.

5 References

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Appendices

All new faculty and academic staff are invited to participate in anonymous surveys at the end of each semester of their first year. This survey is Appendix 1: Biannual Survey. The post survey is for new faculty once they have been at UW-Platteville for two years, and can be found in Appendix 2: Post Survey

Appendix 1: Biannual Survey

1. If you attended any meetings of the New Faculty Learning Community during the <academic year> semester, did you find them beneficial? [yes, no, did not attend]
2. If you did not attend the New Faculty Learning Community meetings during <academic year>, why is that? [N/A I did attend, The topics did not appeal to me, The meeting times did not work for me, I was too busy to attend, I did not know about the meetings]
3. If you did attend, what three topic(s) and/or meetings did you find the most beneficial? [short answer]
4. If you did attend, what topic(s) and/or meetings do you wish were not covered? [short answer]
5. To what degree do you feel the New Faculty Learning Community has fostered a supportive environment as you acclimated to UW-Platteville? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
6. To what degree do you feel the New Faculty Learning Community helped with your acclimation to the wider Platteville community? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
7. To what degree did the New Faculty Learning Community provide an introduction to (**academic advising, academic misconduct, ORSP, RST** – Note: two per semester)? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
8. To what degree do you feel the New Faculty Learning Community assisted you in establishing interdepartmental connections? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
9. To what degree did your participation in the New Faculty Learning Community expose you to different pedagogical tools and techniques? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
10. To what degree did your participation in the New Faculty Learning Community encourage you to seek funding for research? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
11. To what degree did your participation in the New Faculty Learning Community encourage you to seek further knowledge related to pedagogical techniques? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
12. To what degree did your participation in the New Faculty Learning Community enhance your first semester/year at UW-Platteville? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
13. Would you recommend the Learning Community to other new faculty? [yes, no, N/A did not attend]
14. Please share any additional comments or suggestions that you have regarding the New Faculty Learning Community. [short answer]

Appendix 2: Post Survey

1. If you attended any meetings of the New Faculty Learning Community, did you find them beneficial? [yes, no, did not attend]
2. If you did not attend, why is that? [short answer]
3. If you did attend, what topic(s) and/or meetings did you find the most beneficial? [short answer]
4. To what degree do you feel the New Faculty Learning Community fostered a supportive environment as you acclimated to UW-Platteville? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
5. To what degree do you feel the New Faculty Learning Community helped with your acclimation to the wider Platteville community? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
6. To what degree did the New Faculty Learning Community provide an introduction to academic advising, academic misconduct, ORSP, and the RST process? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
7. To what degree do you feel the New Faculty Learning Community allowed you to establish interdepartmental connections? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
8. To what degree did your participation in the New Faculty Learning Community contribute to your success at UW-Platteville? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
9. To what degree did your participation in the New Faculty Learning Community encourage you to seek funding for research? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
10. To what degree did your participation in the New Faculty Learning Community encourage you to seek further knowledge related to pedagogical techniques? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
11.
 - a. Have you submitted a publication or grant proposal in the past two years? [yes, no]
 - b. Have you implemented a new pedagogical technique in your class room over the last two years? [yes, no]
 - c. To what degree did your participation in the New Faculty Learning Community play a role in these professional development activities? [very much, somewhat, not at all, N/A did not attend]
12. Would you recommend the Learning Community to other new faculty? [yes, no, N/A did not attend]
13. Please share any additional comments or suggestions regarding your experience with the New Faculty Learning Community. [short answer]