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Can a Teaching Support Center also be an "Innovation Incubator"?

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A post last month in this column [2] gave a quick summary of two recent reports on the emergence of academic units focused on support innovation in teaching and learning: one from the Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation [3] in the University System of Maryland and one prepared for the American Council on Education [4] by the Huron Consulting Group.

Both reports consider academic support units for innovation in teaching and learning at the institutional level as well as those that foster collaborations across a system or network of institutions. In the previous post we discussed several ways that a network or system of institutions could collaborate on exploration, experimentation and exploitation of innovations in teaching and learning. Today's post will consider the development of educational innovation units within individual institutions, and in particular how that role relates to the more traditional roles of a teaching support center.

These two reports each discuss similar pressures on higher education institutions and systems and each makes the case for a new "interdisciplinary innovation infrastructure" in response to those pressures. Some of these initiatives extend the mandate of existing teaching support centers, but others have been designed to work in parallel with existing centers (or even in competition with them?). That difference in emphasis led me to pose the title question above: can a teaching support center evolve into an incubator for educational innovations – and more importantly, should it?

We'll consider first the mix of activities typically included in the programming of a teaching support center, and then look at how the expertise and culture behind such activities might match up or differ from what an innovation center requires. (And if you are gnashing your teeth right now because your institution can't seem to sustain even a minimal teaching support center, last month's post [2] may be of more interest for hints about how institutions can collaborate in jointly incubating innovation.)

What does a teaching support center do?
Let's assume that your institution already has ongoing programs and people to support your teachers in their efforts to enhance teaching and learning for student success. The mix of activities often looks like this:

- ***Ongoing base activities whose mandate does not change much over time***. These base activities include induction for new teachers, consultations with individuals to help them address particular issues or opportunities, workshops to enhance faculty expertise on teaching methods or technology tools, and training for graduate teaching assistants (for institutions with a significant role in preparing future faculty).
- ***Limited-term projects driven by current academic priorities***. For example, if the current Academic Plan [5] puts a high priority on Learning Outcomes or Experiential Learning, the teaching support center will be expected to increase programming in these areas (some of that project activity may of course eventually transition into ongoing base operations). The same structure can also help Deans to address high priority needs or opportunities within their divisions.
- ***Long-term initiatives with deep strategic impacts across the institution***: Our institution may be building a strategic position in teaching and learning around a particular teaching method or signature outcome, e.g., in Transformative Learning [6], Practice-Based Education [7], Integrative Networked Learning [8] or Personal Formation [9]. The teaching support center will be charged with continuing to support excellence in this aspect of teaching. (Previous posts in this column have looked at ways to map out such a strategic position in the particular cases of regional undergraduate [10] and polytechnic [11] universities.)

A traditional teaching support center – which may also be a learning support center if it has student-facing as well as faculty-facing activities – has to balance this mix of activities, and each presents different challenges and opportunities. The projects can be more difficult to staff with the appropriate expertise for a limited-term emphasis, and the ongoing base activities can often be optimized to reduce costs over time. The impacts of the project streams on academic plan priorities may be more visible than the impacts of the ongoing base activities – and the impacts of the long-term initiatives are likely to only be evident in a 5 year or even 10 year timeframe.

Effective leaders of teaching support centers often take a 'portfolio management' approach to allocating resources, using techniques like these:

- Optimize the base activities, possibly by sharing services with other institutions (as illustrated in last month's post [2])
- Tackle the limited-term priority projects through intensive build-up of faculty expertise, with center staff serving as "connectors, coaches and catalysts" rather than content experts (who can likely be brought in as external resources for limited-term projects)
- Negotiate a portfolio mix for each iteration of the Academic Plan, e.g., 40% funding for ongoing base activities, 40% to support plan priorities, 20% (if you're lucky) for the long-term strategic excellence in methods or outcomes.

Where does Support for Innovation in Teaching and Learning Belong?
Innovation, as a verb, not a noun [12], is the process of exploration, experimentation and exploitation of new opportunities to create value – in our case, to advance teaching and learning for student success. There is limited exploration and experimentation for the incremental changes in the ongoing base activities listed above, and the benefits are typically confined to a particular course or academic unit. We should expect this level of continuous improvement from all of our professional teachers, with only modest involvement of institutional resources.

The limited-term priority projects driven by the Academic Plan may require something beyond incremental innovation, particularly if a new knowledge base or new set of knowledge practices is

involved. Many of our current academic innovation centers are nurturing instructional methods which may be new to our faculty but for which there is already a broad base of exemplary and evidence-based practices. Teaching with online learning is a good example: there are comprehensive open textbooks [13] and case studies [14] which cover the broad knowledge base, and lots of exemplars for specific disciplines [15].

We should expect some degree of experimentation to adapt these methods to our particular context, and there may be a case for institutional support if there is limited local knowledge and we expect the local 'first movers' to serve as connectors and coaches for those who will follow. But we need to emphasize the opportunities to build on what has already been learned rather than promoting invention: however much of a change in thinking toward a new teaching approach or technology may require at the individual level, that work is seldom radical innovation which advances the general body of knowledge in new directions.

Is Failure an Option – or better yet, an Expectation?
That leaves the Strategic Initiatives part of a teaching support center's activities as the main focus for anything beyond Routine Innovation [16]. (Pairing up "routine" and "innovation" may sound strange, but the term contains a strong message that incremental innovation should be a routine expectation for our role as professional teachers.) This is the part of a teaching support centers mandate which often goes, well, 'underdeveloped'.

An effective approach for strategic impact requires that the institution have a Teaching and Learning Strategy in the strong sense of strategy [17]: not just longer-term thinking about threats and opportunities, but a strong sense of how we contribute distinctive value as an institution and what it will require for us to maintain that distinction. We need this strong and deep focus in order to target our limited investments in strategic initiatives effectively. There are going to be a lot of false starts in our efforts to develop and apply new knowledge and tools which change how we approach teaching and learning (let alone innovations to disrupt our established roles and partner networks for creating value). So the few wins we do achieve need to have significant impact.

The corresponding attitude to failed experiments – not just tolerating failure but expecting and planning for it – is another key difference between innovation support activities and the other activities types above which are the natural mandate of a teaching support center. Faculty members looking to enhance their teaching through incremental changes want a high probability of success. So, too, do Provosts and Presidents in respect of the Academic Plan priorities and milestones.

It's hard to imagine faculty considering incremental change feeling comfortable if they see the center is hosting a Fail Faire [18] for last year's projects, to learn from "*the pilots that never got anywhere, the applications that are not delivering, the projects that are not having any measurable impact on the lives of people, and the cultural or technical problems that arise*". But this expectation –that we need to learn from the experiments which didn't work out as we had hoped and accept them as an expected outcome – is a requirement for innovation support units. In my experience, it's challenging to have an innovation culture and a broader teaching support culture operating in the same unit: there are too many team members who fit comfortably in one culture but not the other.

That's not a knock on teaching support centers: the cultural differences can be an obstacle in both directions. A number of institutional innovation centers have arisen from outside the existing

teaching support centers and been driven by individual innovators whose mindsets don't always fit well with the slow pace of incremental change and the requirement for low tolerance of risk where our students' learning is concerned. One leader of an institutionally-supported center for innovation in teaching and learning told me that "we're here to invent the future, not to convince faculty that it's going to be different from the past and the present".

Well, somebody has to do the convincing…by building a lot of trust through a supportive environment where faculty members who come for assistance don't run up against narrower agendas. The best approaches seem to include separate institutional initiatives for teaching support and for innovation in teaching, reporting to a common executive focused on teaching and learning who can build the bridges between those units, rotate staff between them to reduce isolation, and lead in establishing the Innovation Strategy [16] for Teaching and Learning. I plan to say more about how innovation can be included into the institutional or system Teaching and Learning Strategy in a follow-up post later this month.

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[17] https://hbr.org/2010/05/the-five-questions-of-strategy.html
[18] http://blogs.worldbank.org/edutech/failfaire-internal

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