

**External Reviewer's Report of the John S. Kendall Center for Engaged Learning
submitted by
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Introduction

The John S. Kendall Center for Engaged Learning (KCEL) is fully integrated into the life of Gustavus Adolphus College, vital to the core missions of teaching and scholarship. It sustains the faculty in many ways, and is seen by faculty at various career points to be a crucial agent of support. It defines the college for new faculty, helping them to get their footing in new roles at the same time that it makes clear for them what defines the important characteristics of the school. The Kendall Center provides mentoring for junior faculty, but it goes beyond this in many ways, establishing itself as the place to go to in order to thrive or to experiment in their teaching and in adjusting to their new positions. They appreciate that the Center brings them together, building a sense of community and breaking down the isolation that can come from leading busy lives. For more senior faculty, and for departments, it is seen as a resource to help to maintain existing programs as well as for help in innovation. Faculty turn to the Center for individual support, as well as joining in group activities such as writing workshops, research talks, or for public events that help to sustain them as teachers. The Kendall Center not only helps to retain talented faculty, it helps to create them through ongoing development.

Faculty say that the KCEL fosters experimentation, is quickly responsive, and well run in terms of both administration as well as in its sense of vision. We heard many times about how quickly and nimbly the Center responded to requests or needs. It has a high profile both through visible group programming as well as in more quiet consultative modes. It takes on big things such as long-term initiatives, but it also oversees many small, but still significant actions that support faculty.

Faculty development can too often become a vague concept, diffused through various participants in an institution, presumed to be effective but remaining ill defined. Within its fairly short history, the Kendall Center has managed to become the clear center of faculty development, seen not only as effective, but as essential to participating and thriving at the college.

Leadership and Structure

The model of being faculty driven and faculty oriented has been crucial for the Kendall Center's success. If there is any concern about a loss of control by not having a top-down model, it is clearly outweighed by what is gained through this faculty-centered model. Faculty we spoke with consistently praised the "grass roots" nature of the Center's organizational structure and it was clear that this "by the faculty, for the faculty" model positively resonates with the Gustavus Adolphus community.

The current leadership, both by the Director as well as by the Faculty Associates, is quite successful. There was universal praise for Alisa Rosenthal. She seems to have boundless energy and a passion for making things happen. She is both a strong advocate for the Center as well as a creative and thoughtful person in making things happen. The Faculty Associate model has allowed the KCEL to tap into various strengths and expertise that can come from other participants. Colleagues with particular talents and passions can bring their strengths to the program, so that an individual Director is not expected to cover all of the bases during his or her term. Some learning and teaching centers at other institutions have used the model of having a permanent director. This can eliminate the issue of the learning curve that faces a new director every few years, and it can also mean that a permanent director might be more immersed in theory and in the scholarship of teaching and learning. However, we did not detect any weakness or lack of preparation in the model we saw at Gustavus. Furthermore, the addition of the Faculty Associate model helps in terms of broadening the background and strengths the Center can rely upon. The norms of the center, its basic purpose and its methods of operation seem well established, allowing even a new Director to be effective during the early stages of a three year term. In addition, it is clear that the administrative assistant for the KCEL does a terrific job, keeping things running smoothly and allowing the Director to focus on issues rather than being overly concerned with small details.

Facilities and Space

We were very impressed with the layout of the Student Union with regard to the ease with which the KCEL can offer large scale faculty development sessions that include major meals. This is a particularly enviable example of practical and optimal usage of space.

While we did not see the Kendall Center's space during our visit, it is our understanding that they currently occupy a small area in Beck Hall which serves as the base of operations for the administrative assistant and includes a very small meeting space. We were pleased to hear that the KCEL will move to newly renovated space in Anderson Hall in early 2017. While this physical instantiation of the KCEL will continue to serve both purposes mentioned above, it was our understanding that the renovated space will admit other elements such as a writing space and room for a resource library.

Consciously or unconsciously, colleges often signal what they value by the initiatives to which they allocate prominent space. It is our hope that the new space is large enough for the KCEL to grow into and that it becomes the physical hub of faculty development activity and community building on the Gustavus campus. It was striking that several faculty members did not realize the Kendall Center already occupied a space and it did not appear that the administrative assistant interacts with students at all. Hopefully this new space will allow for prominence and greater interaction among campus groups.

Funding

It is not typical for a comparable Center to be so involved in funding opportunities for faculty or in administering grants. From the outside, we wondered why the college had gone with this model, with some concern about having the Center possibly criticized by people who did not receive the funding they had expected. However, it became clear that not only have these problems not developed, but also the Kendall Center has a considerably enhanced profile because of the quickness and fairness it has demonstrated in administering grant funds.

Virtually every group we spoke with brought up the issue that Gustavus does not have professional development accounts. We understand that establishing these accounts is a priority for the College. The issue is not the difficulties of administering PDAs or the tax requirements that surround them, but is the funding needed to support them. If the college could establish a PDA program it would be seen as a significant move forward. Lacking that, the Kendall Center has managed to support much of the activities that would happen through professional development accounts. They have done this with fairness, transparency, and great efficiency. And in doing so, it has certainly raised the profile of the Center.

In general, we thought that the programming of the Center was well run, taking the greatest advantage of its funding. You have a model that works well in terms of the value that comes from your programming. Modest things like food to support writing retreats, or the efficient plans that you have for costs associated with Shop Talks or Teachers Talking programs work extremely well. We did not see any pattern of waste. When you add to this the complex but well run program of grant funding, it was clear that the Kendall Center makes the most of its resources.

Programming

The main public programs run by the Center are the series of Shop Talks that highlight scholarship, Teachers Talking events that keep the focus on pedagogical issues, Writing Retreats that both help to generate scholarship as well as to foster community, and faculty retreats such as Camp Kendall that can be programmed to address particular and timely concerns. Attendance at these events is healthy and consistent over time. In addition, the Center, using the skills of both the Director and the Faculty Associates, conduct a number of important but less public programs that are useful to smaller groups or to individuals. These are more consultative models, such as supporting faculty on issues of diversity, mentoring new faculty, the challenges of home life, and helping with both use of technology, creative course design and innovative teaching.

Each of these areas of programming makes good sense. The Center has a good reputation in terms of being a place to go to, either for individual needs or for public

participation. The topics of the Teachers Talking series were appropriate for the needs of the faculty, especially in the rapidly changing climate of higher education. A good school needs a public forum to talk over pedagogical issues, and the Center is clearly serving that purpose. The Center is effective at building community and in keeping the teaching priorities of the college in focus.

The Center also connects with partners in the college, such as the writing program or the first term seminar program. One of the main questions raised in the self-study was whether or not faculty development was too diffused, if it could benefit from being more condensed. We did not see a need for structural change. There are advantages for letting good people operate with some autonomy. Both with the partners as well as with the Faculty Associates, it was mentioned that perhaps more regular meetings to coordinate their efforts and calendars and to understand what each other are doing would be helpful. But there was not a sense that the diffused model had fostered significant confusion or lack of direction and that some consolidation of organizational structure was in order.

Support for Scholarship

As is the case for many faculty members at small liberal arts colleges, heavy workloads and the perpetual struggle to balance teaching and service responsibilities do not always leave adequate room for scholarly activity. Across age demographics, the faculty we met at Gustavus clearly articulated their dedication to advancing their scholarly lives. The KCEL has supported these goals in a thorough and sensible manner. Programming such as the Shop Talks series and organized writing retreats have gone a long way to highlight this aspect of faculty member's lives. Their desire to encourage the participation of science and arts faculty in writing retreats may be solved by offering some preliminary programming that focuses on learning about the scholarly writing challenges peculiar to those fields. The self-study of the KCEL concluded by asking if they can do more to support professional activity.

Faculty with whom we conversed consistently pointed to two factors that impact their ability to advance their scholarship at a desired pace: time and money. They struggle with finding consistent pockets of time in which to work and having access to the amount of funding required to keep current in their fields. While we appreciate the KCEL's desire to help faculty in this regard, it is not clear that addressing either of these issues comes under their administrative purview. We believe that the level of tangible support they are providing at this time is high impact, high quality, and thematically and tonally appropriate coming from a teaching and learning center. We do not recommend substantial changes to the approach the center is successfully implementing at this time.

Suggestions and Things to Consider

While junior faculty members were positive about the mentoring and support they have received, they did respond positively to the idea of expanded programming for second year faculty. They liked the idea of group mentoring sessions continuing, addressing topics that were specific to their second year such as going through the review process, making research connections both within the college as well as outside of the college, and dealing with the work-life balance. They would appreciate some programming tailored to their specific needs.

An expressed goal of the KCEL leadership is to find ways to effectively serve the special needs of mid-career faculty. Whether navigating toward promotion to professor or trying to balance increasing professional and family demands, the issues facing this population have become focal points for many teaching and learning centers. As the KCEL has such success with mentoring programs for junior faculty, perhaps an adaptation of that model might connect mid-career faculty with more senior faculty “mentors” for targeted conversations on topics of interest.

It is primarily faculty who feel invited and involved with the Teachers Talking events. This is sensible, and expanding it beyond faculty, including large portions of staff could erode faculty ownership and participation. However, there might be a middle ground of more broadly including staff so that they feel deeply connected to the teaching mission of the college. When a presentation touches on an issue that affects a specific unit such as student life, they are often invited to the session. But sometimes attending a session that might not directly relate to the function of a specific unit or office within the college could still be valuable. Imagine admissions hearing about how a research program involved students. Library or academic technology staff could benefit from hearing about teaching innovations across the college. There are other examples of staff involvement that would be positive and are worth considering. But we would not encourage such a broad expansion of this that it would undermine faculty participation in important discussions about teaching.

Planning and implementing a new general academic curriculum will put strain on the Kendall Center. As you go through the stages of planning and implementation, it is important to ensure that the Center has adequate resources, and that current strengths are not undermined as the Center reacts to needs that will arise.

There is some confusion on the part of faculty regarding faculty grants. They identify three groups that are involved with grants- the Office of the Provost, the Faculty Development Committee (FDC), and the Kendall Center. The Director of the Kendall Center meets with the FDC and uses this body in an advisory capacity. The Kendall Center administrative assistant administers some of the grants that are made outside of the Center. The grants are often listed together in publications. This model appears to leave many faculty members perplexed as to who is charged with doing what. There is no indication that this hampers efficiency, but a few small

changes could add clarity to this process. In addition, the KCEL might consider a yearly “grants fair” program where faculty can come and learn about the projects financially supported by the three granting bodies mentioned above. This would help solidify the nature of each grant type for faculty members and provide participants an opportunity to hear about their colleague’s work.

Similarly, there was some lack of clarity in the minds of faculty members with regard to the appointment process for Faculty Associates. It was noted that there have not been any major problems to date with the application system. There was some interest, however, in formalizing the selection processes to provide accountability structures for future KCEL leadership. For example, is there a way to link a faculty-elected body, such as the Faculty Development Committee, to the process of identifying new Faculty Associates in some advisory capacity? It was believed that this would promote transparency and neutralize potential concerns about favoritism.

Both the self-study and comments from faculty we interviewed pointed toward questions of assessing the efficacy of KCEL programming, funding initiatives, and administrative structure, especially with regard to the Faculty Associate model. Working with Assessment Director Dan Moos, it would be advisable to develop a survey instrument that could be administered yearly for faculty reporting and input. Portions of the survey could be crafted to target lingering questions regarding the faculty demographics that make greatest use of the KCEL and those that do not and why that may be the case. It was also clear that there were opportunities to gather “quick data” about funding sources from faculty when they submit their annual activity reports. Some faculty expressed interest in knowing how the KCEL is measuring its effectiveness, in having a sense of how broad the reach of KCEL is across academic divisions, and in receiving regular reports on formal assessment results. There were also questions as to how the programming offered by the KCEL aligns with conversations in higher education at the national level. We encourage the Center organizers to be deliberate in highlighting these connections.

Conclusions

This review was not prompted by any particular concern or issue that had been raised regarding the Center’s performance. The detailed self-study described a well-run program that is vital to the college. Our visit confirmed that the KCEL is operating smoothly and is crucial to faculty development on your campus. Some of the comments from junior faculty were particularly noteworthy in terms of their appreciation for the Center and its staff. It was common for us to hear of a wide variety of ways in which these faculty members feel supported and empowered by KCEL programs. The quickness and flexibility of response is an attribute that has been central to creating the impression that the KCEL is a big part of the lives of your faculty.

The Gustavus faculty we interacted with expressed a genuine sense of belonging with regard to the KCEL. A mid-career member of your faculty described the work of the center as “empowering,” while a more senior colleague spoke of the “legitimate, and yet casual” atmosphere experienced at Kendall Center events. The KCEL is clearly an epicenter of community development on your campus.

There are some features of your center that are different from how many other schools have approached faculty development through teaching and learning centers, but the decisions that have been made have aligned with the core mission of supporting faculty, and it is a model that meshes well with your institution. We admired the fact that you have developed a program that works well for you, making the greatest use of resources, and being inventive in solving problems. The new location will hopefully add some visibility to this important part of your campus.

The self-study posed some questions about possible changes. Our list of suggestions is fairly short because we do not believe that large-scale changes are called for. Instead, we suggest a few minor adjustments that might clarify roles, add to transparency and communication, and perhaps involve larger segments of your community. Any and all funding entrusted to this organization is well managed and entirely dedicated to promoting faculty advancement. Gustavus Adolphus is getting a great deal of value from the KCEL and we hope that the Kendall Center will continue to be defined by fine leadership, faculty-centered initiatives, financial growth, and prosperity.

Respectfully submitted,

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