

Silos Belong on Farms: Wake Forest University's Professional Development Center Brings Together Faculty and Staff for the Good of the University

By Andrea Ellis

When I took my history of higher education course in graduate school, I did not fully appreciate what I was learning, until I realized colleges and universities are still struggling with many of the same challenges several centuries later. Sometimes, in order to understand the present, you have to go back in time.

The earliest American institutions were known for their religious connections and focus on theology. They later faced the ever-changing demands of a business that went beyond the institution's administration of faculty and deans. With the rise of "university management," staff members, or administrators, were hired to manage the operations of the institution. This created a rivalry between faculty and staff members around the issue of who had ultimate control and led to a struggle for equality between these two groups, as faculty felt they should be in command, and staff felt that they should be treated equally to faculty. Sound familiar?

Now, centuries later, institutions across the country continue to address the struggles that accompany faculty and staff working in different silos. Whether it's due to history, the nature of one's job, lack of interaction, or a blatant misunderstanding for what the "other side" does, it has led to significant challenges within higher education.

When Wake Forest University announced its strategic plan in 2006, several components focused on breaking down these silos by encouraging professional development and interdepartmental collaboration. One of the many ways these strategic goals are being met is through the Professional Development Center and its

leadership development programs that foster interaction and communication by educating faculty and staff in one classroom.

In the fall of 2007, research began to determine what types of professional development were occurring across

campus. Interviews, focus groups and surveys revealed abundant professional development opportunities, but a lack of communication between departments, both academic and administrative. And a perceived sense of territorial issues seemed to prevent interdepartmental collaboration.

Upon these findings, a 12-member advisory board was created — consisting of administrators, faculty

members and staff — to create an avenue for collaborative professional development between and among all facets of the workforce. The board helped determine available campus resources and where there were gaps in professional development opportunities. The group was challenged to create the ideal resource with a mission of serving the entire campus. After considerable research, networking and planning, the Professional Development Center (PDC) was launched in March 2008.

Now, three years later, the PDC is a valued resource among faculty, staff and administrators, offering more than 1,100 unique classes each fiscal year.

An Unprecedented Approach to Professional Development

The PDC is a comprehensive personal and professional resource with a focus on providing faculty and staff across campus with opportunities to develop and grow in a holistic manner. Classes are offered in numerous



Wake Forest University staff and faculty members participating in the Leadership Development Program

areas, including health and wellness, finance and legal, diversity and inclusion, academic, technology, leadership and management. The concept is based on the “hub and spoke” approach. When visiting the PDC website (www.pdc.wfu.edu), it appears that it is one Center. On the home page of the website, a visitor sees all the opportunities available, including classes, events, conferences, workshops, etc. However, on the back end of the site, over 50 different departments are instrumental in creating these opportunities.

The database operates off of proprietary software created by PDC team members. Software features include class registrations, automated e-mail reminders, food preference selection, paying via credit card and automated surveys. The PDC software also allows the department offering the event to keep records of attendees, automatically creates an e-mail roster, indicates class limits, develops automated waitlists and collects requested data per the department, among many other features.

The PDC is unprecedented in many ways. The Center reports to both the offices of the provost and the vice president for administration and finance (through human resources). Originally, the PDC only reported to HR. However, in year two of the Center’s existence, the office of the provost agreed to fund half of the director’s salary and made significant contributions to other funding. This was a pivotal move, as reporting to the office of the provost gave the PDC credibility with WFU faculty.

Another unique aspect of the PDC is the faculty-staff programming opportunities. Wake Forest already offered successful management programs through HR for first-time managers. However, the university lacked programs for its middle-management and higher level administrators. Without new programs, the aforementioned silos would continue to cause disconnect and dissatisfaction amongst WFU’s administrative leaders.

We were of the mindset that if the leaders on campus had a better appreciation for the value and differences between faculty and staff, perhaps this understanding would spread across campus and help to begin breaking down these harmful silos. To this end, we created two distinct programs designed to facilitate more communication between faculty and staff members: the Leadership Development Program and the Aspiring Leaders Program.

Leadership Development Program

Launched in the fall of 2009, the year-long Leadership Development Program (LDP) focuses on leadership and management for faculty chairs and senior administrators. Participants in the first year of the program were nominated by a member of the university’s executive cabinet and then were required to submit a formal application for consideration (applications are now accepted not only via nomination but also directly from applicants without a nomination).

The program includes monthly sessions that focus on critical leadership/management topics, a 360-degree evaluation, multiple leadership and personality assessments and individual coaching. The curriculum accommodates different perspectives unique to Wake Forest, such as an appreciation for its culture, alignment with the strategic plan and a focus on university challenges.

The LDP is facilitated by a renowned world-class provider, thus representing the university’s investment in and commitment to leadership skills development. Participants (10 faculty members and 10 staff members divided into four work teams) are tasked with projects that align to WFU’s strategic plan, thereby providing an environment in which to partner with other leaders across campus and contributing directly and significantly to the priorities of the university. LDP participants are also given the opportunity to help shape future LDP initiatives.

Participants also work in teams on capstone projects provided by the Cabinet. Projects for the first year of the program — community engagement, improving campus communication, work-life balance and sustainability — focused on best practices analyses and recommendations on higher education topics. In addition to assigning each of the four teams a topic, an administrator (topic expert) was also appointed to each group to provide advice or assistance. At the end of the program, the teams presented their findings to the Cabinet.

The university and several of the past program participants continue to move forward on these projects, which include new health and wellness initiatives, enhanced communication mediums, opportunities to gather monthly to learn about different facets of the university at an event called “Campus Connections,” and many new sustainability projects. After tremendous

interest and success in its first year, the program is now offered every other year to ensure it remains prestigious and competitive.

Aspiring Leaders Program

The Professional Development Center's other leadership initiative, the Aspiring Leaders Program, is geared toward tenured or permanent faculty members and staff members with a minimum of five to seven years of experience who show leadership potential. Six classes focused on critical leadership and management skills are offered throughout the academic year on a monthly basis to a cohort of 10 faculty members and 10 staff members.

Because the focus of this program is on developing leaders and teaching participants about the nuances and culture across campus, all classes are taught by internal talent within the schools of business and communications

faculty and staff members individual coaching sessions, group coaching, mediation and coach training.

Lastly, since the PDC has become "the" resource on campus for development needs, it has also brought about the opportunity to expand organizational development internally at Wake Forest. In addition to the offices of the provost and VP for administration and finance, the PDC has been an organizational resource for several other Cabinet members and their teams. By using internal resources, along with a short list of reputable, local partners, the PDC has helped enhance the community and the effectiveness of departments across campus, and has greatly reduced the cost of such services.

The success of the PDC could not have been realized without the continued support, resources and the dual reporting structure that are provided by the offices of the

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and the finance and human resources departments. Gathering internal talent for the program helps build interdepartmental collaboration, gives faculty members who lead sessions a chance to share their expertise with other campus community members, and imposes no financial burden, as faculty members donate their time (a maximum of one day per program).

Aiming High and Thinking Boldly

As the PDC and its programs have achieved remarkable success, we continue to move forward with several new innovative ideas and offerings. After realizing the success of the Leadership Development and Aspiring Leaders programs, a third program, Cultivating our Organization to Realize Excellence (CORE), launched in August 2011. This program is based on newly established university competencies and focuses on the general community, offering a wide variety of courses to help develop and retain faculty and staff. Another relatively new facet of the PDC is the creation of a Coaches Consortium that offers

provost and VP for administration and finance. Other essential players are the PDC advisory board (which has expanded and now has a subsidiary PDC technology board) and the many faculty and staff who give of their time and talent.

Personal and professional growth is part of the culture at Wake Forest University. In a recent WFU commencement speech, President Nathan Hatch advised graduates to "aim high and think boldly." The PDC and its programming will continue to live by this philosophy with the creation of innovative and unique approaches to developing Wake Forest faculty and staff. 

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