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Miami University's Learning Community for PFF: Institutionalizing a Departmental Program

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Miami University appears to be the first university to receive a departmental-level Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) grant and to have institutionalized the program "upward" to the university level. The authors describe the structure of Miami's PFF community and its complementarity with departmental programs in light of the PFF literature on the activities of university and departmental programs. The results reveal that (a) some benefits commonly attributed to PFF programs are evident very early in participation and (b) students in both departmental and university programs have noted deepened reflection on teaching, broadened conceptions of faculty life, and broadened awareness of differences among institutions. Students in the university program also recount broadened appreciation of disciplinary diversity, and students in the departmental program also report benefits from the depth of their involvement with a partner campus. Finally, the authors reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of university versus departmental PFF programs.

The Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) Project is a joint initiative by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the Council of Graduate Schools to improve the preparation of academic-bound graduate students for faculty roles. Doctoral institutions or departments are expected to form partnerships with non-doctoral institutions so that students learn about the ways in which faculty responsibilities are affected by institutional context and increase their awareness of diversity. Other organizations and individual universities have developed similar initiatives for this purpose.

From the beginning of the PFF initiative, its organizers were aware of the critical importance of both university leadership and departmental ownership of such programs (Ferren, Gaff, & Clayton-Pedersen, 2002). They pointed out that university-level leadership helps identify resources and synergistic efficiencies and advocates for needed structural changes. Departmental involvement provides support for student and faculty participants. Consequently, an important feature of the PFF initiative was to reach out through disciplinary organizations to start departmental programs.

The PFF website (www.preparing-faculty.org) indicates that 11 universities have received grants at both the graduate school and departmental levels. Several of these institutions have PFF programs in more than one department. The programs vary in the level of cooperation/coordination between departmental and university programs. In 2000, Miami University's psychology department was selected by the American Psychological Association to receive one of its four PFF seed grants. Conversations began at the end of the first year of the departmental program regarding how to spread the program to Miami's other doctoral programs. To our knowledge, the University of New Hampshire is the only other university PFF program to have begun at the departmental level (psychology); similar upward-institutionalization plans now are being made at University of Georgia (again, from the psychology department).

In this article we describe the structure of Miami's university PFF community and its complementarity with departmental programs in light of the PFF literature on activities of university and departmental programs. We then describe preliminary results from the university program, especially as they relate compare to results from other PFF programs, and highlight similarities to and differences from the departmental program. Finally, we reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of university versus departmental programs, especially from the perspective of our experience at Miami University.

Structure of the University PFF Community and Its Complementarity With Departmental Programs

PFF programs have undertaken to use information from hiring institutions and from surveys of doctoral students and alumni to improve graduate training for the three major functions of academic work: teaching, research, and service (Adams, 2002; Council on Undergraduate Research, 2003; DeNeef, 2002; Golde & Dore, 2001). Pruitt-Logan (1995) has described some of these efforts at the university and departmental levels. University-level programs have offered seminars on general issues of college teaching—including diversity issues—and on professional/career issues by faculty and administrators from diverse institutions. They also have established sequences of levels of experience/expertise for teaching assistants, accompanied by pay raises, and certification programs for professional development. They have offered training for faculty in mentoring graduate students, while also teaching graduate students methods of documenting their expertise in teaching, research, and service via portfolios. Departmental programs have offered courses on discipline-specific pedagogy, created forums for discussing academic and non-academic career trajectories, created the option of including questions on pedagogy on departmental qualifying exams, and provided support for students to attend disciplinary conferences—including those with a focus on pedagogy.

Miami's provost, graduate dean, and director of teaching effectiveness programs have strongly supported our departmental PFF program from the beginning. Because Miami University values undergraduate education, it also is prepared to look for opportunities to create synergy between its graduate and undergraduate programs and to seize opportunities to be known as an institution that not only values excellence in its own undergraduate teaching but also perpetuates and disseminates outstanding teaching by preparing its graduate students to be exceptional faculty members.

We chose a learning community approach for the university-level program because this technique has been part of an award-winning set of faculty development programs at Miami for over 20 years. Our Committee for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) has developed a common core of program elements for these communities, along with a set of mechanisms for their operation, and a significant percentage of Miami faculty have participated in them. Consequently, the university-level PFF program did not have to "reinvent the wheel" in terms of either structural elements or familiarity/goodwill. Another major factor nurturing our

PFF seedlings has been the support of our regional campuses. From the beginning of the PFF programs, the partnership between doctoral and non-doctoral campuses has been a defining characteristic that sets this initiative apart from any other type of TA-training program. The value of the support received from our regional campus administrators and faculty cannot be overstated.

The core elements of the PFF learning community are similar to those in other CELT communities. Participants are recognized for their participation in the program by completing a one-hour course each semester. The course explores such topics as university structures and governance, advising, construction of a teaching portfolio, peer review of teaching, service learning, diversity on college campuses, multicultural teaching and learning, working effectively with co-curricular and support functions of the university, ethical issues in teaching, research, and work relations. PFF members attend the national Lilly Conference on College Teaching, hosted by Miami University. Participants also receive \$200 to support a teaching or professional development project during the year. Some of the students have used the funds to attend teaching-related conferences, while others have developed enrichment opportunities for their students, such as field trips. Finally, PFF students work with a mentor from a regional campus to learn about institutional differences in faculty roles. Miami University has two regional campuses that are open-enrollment institutions focusing on teaching and service. Many of these faculty members have participated in CELT communities and are willing to give back to those programs by serving as mentors to others entering the profession.

When planning the university-wide PFF program we sought an optimal balance between centralization (to reduce redundancy) and decentralization (to best fit the diversity of departments and disciplines). Planning discussions with chairs of doctoral departments organized by the graduate dean underscored the importance of complementarity with pre-existing departmental teaching and TA-training programs. Neither faculty nor students would benefit from duplication of effort. As Pruitt-Logan (1995) notes, some aspects of professional development training can be readily addressed by cross-disciplinary seminars (for instance, writing-across-the-curriculum), whereas others are best handled by departmental training programs or disciplinary mentors (for example, expectations for course-specific content). Consequently, the plan for the university PFF community was to focus primarily on professional development issues that were unlikely to be covered in TA-training programs. For example, we de-emphasized seminars on lecturing or constructing exams, and instead emphasized topics such as teaching portfolios, institutional service, and

advising undergraduates.

The issue of complementarity with departmental efforts was particularly acute for the pre-existing psychology departmental PFF program. We wanted students in the psychology department to be able to benefit from either the departmental PFF program or the university version, or both. Consequently, the two programs were planned to be complementary; for example, department students attend the speaker series offered by the university community. The most important difference between the two is that the departmental program offers a wider range of campuses for students to do placements and a deeper level of involvement with a campus and a mentor. Students in the departmental program are expected to do 50 hours of “placement” on a partner campus, which may involve adjunct teaching, working with undergraduates in research, shadowing, and the like.

One feature of the university-level PFF learning community that distinguishes it from other CELT learning communities is that about half of the meetings of the group are focused on guest speakers and are open to any graduate student within the university. Thus, in a given semester, the community meets alone 4 or 5 times (i.e., approximately monthly) and 3 times with other graduate students. The PFF community is open only to doctoral students, while there are a large number of students in masters’ programs present at the open meetings. Furthermore, only a few students are able to make the commitment to participate in a yearlong program, yet many students could benefit from sampling of some of the topics being discussed by the community. The open meetings make these options available to a wider number of students while serving as publicity for the program. Although the open meetings have been advertised to all graduate students, the PFF members have made up the bulk of the attendees, so that no evaluation data were collected from non-community members. (One may question whether a group that holds many open meetings can function as a true learning community—we will return to this issue in the section on “Lessons Learned.”)

Preliminary Results and Comparisons With the Departmental Program

One of the benefits of PFF programs cited to graduate students most often is increased awareness of faculty roles at different institutions (DeNeef, 2002; Pruitt-Logan, Gaff, & Weibl, 1998). As a result of their participation in PFF, graduate students do gain this understanding. They also are better prepared to make choices about the type of institution where they would

like to work, better able to convince prospective hiring institutions of the match between themselves and the institution, and, ultimately, more likely to be successful in the professional environment of their choosing.

Our experience with the psychology department's PFF program had borne out these benefits. Each year, participants were asked to write brief reflective statements about the importance of the program to their professional development. A content analysis of these reflections showed that the primary benefits mentioned included a broadened understanding of the roles of faculty members and of the diversity of academic institutions.

A striking observation when we began the university PFF community was how rapidly these benefits make themselves known. Seven post-masters' degree doctoral students were selected for the first year of the program, representing four departments: zoology (3 students), psychology (2), political science (1), and educational leadership (1). One of the psychology students had been a member of the departmental PFF program the previous year. As part of the PFF Learning Community, students keep a notebook of their involvement with the program and their reflections on the meaning of the activities. At mid-year, for the purposes of this study, students were asked to re-examine their notebooks, think about their goals for participation in the program, and discuss the progress they had made so far toward those goals. A content analysis of these reflections revealed a strikingly similar list of ways that members of the community felt the program had affected their professional outlooks: a deepened reflection on teaching, a broadened conception of faculty life, a greater awareness of differences among institutions, and a broadened awareness of disciplinary diversity.

The unique feature of these reflections, however, when we compared them to those of students in the departmental PFF program for the purposes of this article, was a broadened awareness of disciplinary diversity. By contrast, a student who had participated in both the departmental and university programs highlighted the benefit that the departmental program offers of depth of experience on the partner campus. These benefits are well-documented in national surveys of PFF alumni; however, we know that quantitative data averaged across individuals may represent no one individual. Thus, we complemented survey data by the powerful impact of hearing individual students expressing in their reflections the ways that even a few short months of university-level PFF participation had deeply affected their professional visions.

Benefits of the University-Level PFF Program

A Deepened Reflection on Teaching

Students' reflections commented on opportunities to critique their teaching. For example, Craig (political science) said, "I believe that the key for success in the classroom is being honestly capable of assessing your own strengths and weaknesses in a classroom as the instructor and not as a student assistant or researcher." Janaki (zoology) said, "After I chose my mentor, I have learned a lot about the opportunities that I could take advantage of, even as a graduate student, to improve on my teaching abilities."

Participants also experienced changes in their philosophies of teaching. Craig (political science) said, "One of the key distinctions I was able to make early in my participation in Miami's PFF was the concept of good teaching being understood as facilitating the learning of the student." Participants commented too on how powerful the exercise of creating a teaching portfolio had been for them. As Stephen (zoology) said,

In creating the portfolio, I really had to examine my teaching philosophy and whether or not I was truly achieving my goals in the classroom. Just taking the time to compile my thoughts and materials has already changed some of my strategies.

A Broadened Conception of Faculty Life

PFF participants generally felt underprepared by their previous graduate education for the many roles that faculty must undertake. Andrea (educational leadership) said that "Despite having spent almost 10 years in university classes, I had little understanding of what faculty members did outside of the classroom. Melissa (psychology) felt the same way, "I want to have the knowledge of how to mentor students and interact with students effectively. I also would like to understand how to advise undergraduates and where scholarship and service fit in to various academic positions." Craig (political science) was explicit about the impact that being underprepared for the complex balancing act of faculty life could have on one's teaching:

With all of the pressures and expectations that exist outside the classroom in the profession, the limited time and space remaining to maneuver regarding course content and preparation . . . will probably cause most new teachers to focus on the mechanics of teaching a focused collection of material rather than on

student-centered or holistic learning outcomes.

Graduate students often wonder whether it is worthwhile to balance all of these faculty responsibilities, as exemplified by Patrick (zoology):

I wanted to walk in the shoes of a faculty member and see for myself the responsibilities that came along with the title of professor of zoology. . . . I wanted to see if faculty members were really happy with the choices that they had made. . . . The faculty members I have interacted with may be frustrated at times, but most gave a ringing endorsement of the academic career. . . . Through my experiences in PFF, I feel that I am better informed about the career, and I am better prepared to apply for academic jobs.

A Greater Awareness of Differences Among Institutions

Participants expressed ways that their experiences had broadened their awareness of differences among academic institutions. For example, Janaki (zoology) said, "As a foreign student, I was not exposed to the difference between liberal arts and research oriented schools initially, but the distinction became real clear after a semester in this program." Melissa (psychology) mentioned how important her mentor was in helping her learn about the differences between doctoral and non-doctoral campuses: "The pairing with my mentor has been very rewarding because I get a perspective from a smaller institution, which does not emphasize scholarship and instead emphasizes service and teaching."

A Broadened Awareness of Disciplinary Diversity

University program participants were more likely than departmental participants to mention the ways they had been enriched by contact with departmental diversity. Andrea (educational leadership) said,

. . . coming from a department where class sizes over 20 are unheard of, I was amazed to learn how students in the sciences successfully struggled to teach lecture classes of hundreds. . . . Because of the interdisciplinary approach of the PFF program, I was able to learn from the experiences of people I otherwise would never have met.

Zak (psychology) elaborated on how belonging to an interdisciplinary group had affected his sense of identity:

Specifically, interactions with students and faculty from a

broader range of disciplinary backgrounds and philosophies have fostered a deeper sense of what it means to identify myself as a member of the academy. My understanding of the strengths of faculty in each discipline has become sharpened in juxtaposition, and so my expectations of continued education and service to my institution as a faculty member has become sharpened, as well. It is clear that knowledge and skills resident in faculty from various disciplines are interdependent, thus ensuring my eventual coordination with and intake of those attributes in committee work and faculty development workshops. This realization inspires enthusiasm for contributing my own proficiencies in servicing and educating peers at my eventual home institution.

*A Benefit of the Departmental Program:
Depth of Involvement on Partner Campuses*

Participants in the departmental PFF program have more extensive contact with students on the partner campuses and, thus, are more likely to experience personal/professional change as a result. Zak, having been a both a departmental and a university PFF scholar, serves as a case example. As part of the departmental program, he taught a summer session of introductory psychology at the College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, Ohio. This extended experience led Zak to reexamine his teaching philosophy:

The opportunity to teach an introductory course and to experience more diverse student learning styles during my placement at a partner campus catalyzed deep reflection and substantial development of my philosophy as an educator; whereas I had previously identified simply as a student-centered instructor, encountering students that await introduction to the domain and that have greater needs for regulatory structure prompted revision of that philosophy into a dynamic one across the curriculum.

Lessons Learned

Benefits of PFF Participation for Doctoral Students

Although Miami's university PFF program is very young, it is striking that within a few months of participation, students reported experiencing benefits that are cited by departmental program participants only after a

year (or more). Similar benefits have been demonstrated by larger scale longitudinal studies of PFF participants. For example, a national survey of PFF participants indicates that graduate students who have been involved in such programs believe that it has enhanced their understanding of faculty roles, increased awareness of diverse institutions, increased their teaching knowledge, and helped them be competitive in the job market (Pruitt-Logan et al., 1998). At the end of their first semester, participants in the university program already are revealing that they are becoming more reflective teachers who are more aware of the challenges of balancing the many demands of faculty life within the context of specific institutional missions. The university and departmental programs were designed to be complementary; thus, each offers specific additional benefits, such as appreciation of disciplinary diversity versus depth of contact with partner campus students, respectively.

As mentioned earlier, it is a valid question whether the university program can be a true “learning community” if half the meetings of the group are open to outsiders. According to the website for the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) Project on Faculty Learning Communities (www.units.muohio.edu/flc/what.shtml), learning communities go beyond seminar series. They focus on multidisciplinary and community. They are voluntary organizations that last over at least 6 months; focus on holistic, experiential learning; build empathy, openness, trust, and consensus; engage complex problems; and energize and empower participants. The responses from the university program participants indicate that they experienced these benefits. They came to appreciate the connection across disciplines. The experience of building a teaching portfolio served to empower them to make changes in their teaching. They experienced both personal and professional growth as they engaged the complex problems of carrying out the many facets of faculty roles in different institutional contexts. Thus, the practice of having some open meetings apparently did not shake the bonds and trust the group had developed or deter them from forming a real learning community.

What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of university-versus discipline-based programs? One way to consider this question is to examine the elements of PFF programs that have been noted by alumni to be particularly valuable (DeNeef, 2002). Alumni indicate that it is particularly valuable to observe/learn from outstanding teachers at predominantly undergraduate institutions who can serve as role models for teaching practices that are well suited to these environments. If possible, it is highly useful to teach (or guest lecture) at another institution. Because of disciplinary differences in teaching styles, it might be especially

valuable to arrange such opportunities within departmental programs. In both of Miami's PFF programs, students work with a mentor in their discipline. On the other hand, alumni report (DeNeef, 2002) that teaching portfolios, which are a routine assignment for university-program members, not only assist students in articulating their philosophy of teaching and assessing their own teaching effectiveness, but also they are becoming more widely used in the hiring process. The basics of preparing teaching portfolios can be taught in a cross-disciplinary context.

In terms of planning their research programs, Adams (2002) notes that doctoral students need to be made aware of potential limitations on research time and support at predominantly undergraduate institutions. Disciplinary faculty advisers can offer guidance on how to adapt to these limitations, for instance, to use alternative methods. In addition to disciplinary research, faculty at these institutions often pursue the scholarship of teaching and learning, which, as noted by Huber and Morreale (2002), differs somewhat across disciplines. However, as Adams (2002) points out, many faculty at predominantly undergraduate institutions adopt interdisciplinary approaches, and a cross-disciplinary PFF program can open students' eyes to previously unsuspected potential collaborations. For example, the topic of physical/mental disabilities might be approached by researchers in education, rhetoric, or social psychology.

Many issues concerning service responsibilities can be discussed effectively in a cross-disciplinary PFF program, for instance, the impact of a visiting/term position on one's career, or the problems experienced by "token" faculty. But the alumni that DeNeef (2002) surveyed found it especially valuable to learn from faculty at non-doctoral institutions about service expectations, evaluation, and reward and tenure systems. Such contacts are likely to have the greatest impact within disciplines. Similarly, conversations about how to make connections among teaching, research, and service are likely to make a more lasting impression when the disciplinary content is similar.

Benefits of PFF Programs for Doctoral Institutions and Non-Doctoral Partners

In addition to examining benefits for doctoral students, we can also compare the benefits of departmental and university PFF programs for doctoral institutions and their non-doctoral partners. Both university-level and departmental doctoral programs can benefit from PFF programs because PFF programs impact commonly used indices of graduate program quality, such as alumni placement and satisfaction, student recruitment,

and student diversity (Lee, 2001). In addition, university programs offer the advantage of articulating ways that such programs are consistent with the university's mission and culture, and providing linkages to already existing university resources, such as faculty development or teaching/learning centers, internal grant support, and the like.

Partner institutions also benefit, largely because of the opportunities for their undergraduates to interact with graduate students who can offer specialized expertise and youthful enthusiasm and can serve as role models for undergraduates who seek to go to graduate school themselves. As we have found at Miami, the opportunity to partner with regional campuses of the university provides ready-made institutional connections. Regional campus partner faculty already may have participated in some related teaching-development programs offered by the university and, thereby, feel some bond with PFF participants. In addition, PFF programs are strengthened if there is strong university-level administrative support for partner faculty to participate as PFF mentors as part of their reward structure. On the other hand, we have found that opportunities for partners to use graduate students as adjunct faculty may be easiest to broker at the departmental level, because departments are likely to have parallel curricular structures. Similarly, mutual benefits of research collaboration and recruitment, such as placing qualified partner undergraduates in doctoral faculty members' labs, are most obvious at the departmental level.

At the core, both departmental- and university-level PFF programs exist to help doctoral students meet their goals of becoming better prepared for academic careers. When we asked members of Miami's university-level PFF learning community to list their goals for involvement with the program, one of the most striking observations was that two members from different disciplines produced virtually identical lists of goals: Melissa (psychology) said, "The first [goal] is more confidence in my teaching. . . . Secondly, I would like to be better prepared for getting a job. . . . Finally, I want to understand my responsibilities as a new faculty member." Stephen (zoology) said, "My hopes in joining this program were to (a) shed light on the mysteries of being a 'faculty member,' (b) give me an edge in the job market, and (c) allow me to critique my teaching style and effectiveness." This striking similarity across disciplines suggests that an important function of PFF programs is simply to provide a conversational space where students, doctoral faculty, partner mentors, and partner undergraduates can reflect on the academic profession.

Doctoral faculty members and their graduate students are under a great deal of pressure for research productivity, and their interactions

are heavily focused on research supervision. As Bodmer (2002) said in summarizing the reports of PFF participants' experiences across several disciplines, the programs provide doctoral students with "permission to talk" about their questions and concerns regarding the profession they are entering. When doctoral students are encouraged to ask questions, common issues arise—as in Melissa and Steve's nearly identical lists—about teaching, about their concerns regarding the job search, and about the daily lives of faculty members. When mentors respond, the answers is often "It depends—on your discipline and your institution." Through such conversations, novice faculty gain a deeper and more complex appreciation of the academy, and of the roles and responsibilities that they have chosen.

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