Shasta College

Teaching College Focus Group Report

Fall 2024

Introduction

In the Fall of 2024, the Shasta College Research Office conducted five faculty focus groups to explore ways to strengthen Shasta College's identity—and public perception—as a teaching-first institution that prioritizes student learning. We want our commitment to teaching and learning excellence to be recognized within the college and the broader community. Thirty-nine faculty participated in the focus groups. The groups were meant to uncover the good practices already occurring that we should consider scaling and continuous improvement efforts we may adopt. The following interrelated themes emerged from the focus groups: diversity and inclusion, supporting student growth, professional development, collaboration and interpersonal relationships, a sense of belonging, institutional support and structural challenges, online and hybrid learning, and community engagement and visibility.

Diversity and Inclusion

Faculty highlighted the importance of making their teaching content and practices inclusive and reflective of their students' diverse backgrounds. Common practices involved revisiting and revising course materials to ensure equitable representation. One participant shared, "I made a big effort to change my examples to be more diverse.… I was trying to get a relevant diverse of models in my samples in the classes I teach. So that's one tangible…change I made this year". Another instructor noted the impact of student feedback on their curriculum design: "I found that a lot of the students felt that I wasn't teaching enough women's history or Black history.… I've changed my course to honor that request."

The accessibility theme was also intertwined with inclusivity, as faculty recognized that equitable teaching requires meeting the needs of all students, including those with disabilities. As one participant noted, you cannot have diversity, equity, and inclusion without accessibility. These efforts to embrace diversity reflected a commitment to academic excellence and fostering a sense of belonging among students from varied backgrounds.

Supporting Student Growth

Faculty viewed their role as educators not only as facilitators of knowledge but also as mentors who nurture both academic and personal growth. A recurring strategy was using reflective assignments that encouraged students to consider their learning journey. Participants found that student reflection on what they learned, how they learned it, and what they found challenging helps create engaging learning environments and provides valuable insights

Personalized feedback was another cornerstone of engagement. "When I give feedback, I try to write something personal," shared one instructor. Overall, these individualized approaches were seen as powerful ways to show students that their unique contributions were valued and functioned to foster a deeper investment in learning.

Professional Development

Faculty expressed a strong interest in professional development opportunities that were collaborative, practical, and accessible. Since faculty learn so much from each other during formal evaluation observations, a structured peer-to-peer observation program (outside the evaluation process) emerged as a reoccurring idea.

Flexibility in professional development was emphasized as being very important, particularly for part-time faculty who often face logistical challenges. Participants encouraged the District to ensure online, hybrid, or asynchronous opportunities could serve part-time faculty well. The faculty also highlighted the importance of sessions that offered actionable strategies that could be implemented quickly.

Collaboration and Interpersonal Relationships

Strong interpersonal relationships and a collaborative culture were essential for fostering a supportive academic community and advancing the teaching-first mission. Faculty valued opportunities to reflect and share strategies in a non-judgmental and supportive environment. These informal yet purposeful interactions were seen as vital for creating a shared sense of purpose and connection.

As suggested above, programs like peer observation and coaching emerged as particularly effective models for fostering collaboration. Faculty appreciated the safe spaces these programs could provide, allowing for the exchange of ideas and constructive feedback without the pressures of formal evaluations.

Structured and dedicated time for collaboration also emerged as a common concern, as many participants noted the difficulty of prioritizing collaboration amidst competing responsibilities. Faculty emphasized that reliable opportunities to work together on teaching practices could significantly enhance professional development and collegiality. The need for more structural support, such as structured time for collaboration and dedicated resources, came up from several participants. Despite the challenges, there was a shared belief that collaboration is integral to improving teaching practices.

Sense of Belonging

Faculty involved in the focus groups prioritized creating a sense of belonging for students, particularly in online learning environments where connection can feel less organic. Strategies like personalized communication and inclusive teaching materials were emphasized.

Faculty also sought to include students' voices in shaping the learning experience. One instructor shared that they ask for mid-semester feedback and make sure to implement at least one thing students ask for. The instructor explained that it shows students that "I'm listening." These efforts to humanize the classroom, whether physical or virtual, were viewed as vital to fostering student engagement and success.

Institutional Support and Structural Challenges

The faculty identified several structural challenges impacting their ability to focus on teaching and supporting students. Administrative burdens emerged as a significant issue, with one participant noting, "There are so many things that we're doing outside of the classroom. So much of our time is taken up by that…. If we want to be a teaching college, then we're going to have to allow time for teaching and collaboration."

As another example, students expect instructional faculty to support them emotionally when they are having challenges. Faculty recognized the immense effort required to support students' mental and emotional well-being, which often falls on instructors who are not experts in this area.

Technology barriers also emerged as an issue, particularly for online and hybrid students who may not have the tools or training to do well in online classes. This takes time away from teaching the course content.

Online and Hybrid Learning

The shift to online learning prompted faculty to explore innovative strategies for creating engaging and inclusive virtual classrooms. The faculty also emphasized the importance of humanizing online learning spaces. "Even a short weekly video where they see my face makes a big difference. Students say it makes the course feel more personal and accessible," shared one instructor. These practices reflected a commitment to maintaining connections in the digital age.

Community Engagement and Visibility

Faculty saw opportunities to strengthen the College's community presence by showcasing its teaching excellence. Events and awards were frequently mentioned as ways to highlight faculty and student achievements. "Let's celebrate teaching excellence publicly, whether through awards or student showcases," proposed one participant. Other faculty suggested revisiting non-credit offerings to ensure we are meeting the needs of community members who may want to learn but are not planning to earn an award.

Recommendations Based on Focus Group Themes

Diversity and Inclusion

- Curriculum Revision Support: Provide faculty with resources and training to revise course materials to ensure equitable representation of diverse identities, including race, gender, and disability.

- Accessibility Training: Offer workshops on integrating accessibility into course design to meet the needs of all students and align with diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.
- Cultural Competence: Facilitate ongoing professional development on cultural competency and inclusive teaching practices.

Supporting Student Growth

- Expand Reflective Learning Practices: Develop training for faculty to incorporate reflective assignments that encourage students to evaluate their learning.
- Promote Personalized Feedback: Provide examples and best practices for delivering meaningful and personalized feedback to students.

Professional Development

- Peer Observation Programs: Pilot a structured peer-to-peer observation program outside of the evaluation process to promote collaborative learning among faculty.
- Flexible Formats: Ensure professional development opportunities are accessible to part-time and remote faculty through online, hybrid, or asynchronous options.
- Action-Oriented PD: Focus on workshops that provide actionable strategies for immediate classroom application.

Collaboration and Interpersonal Relationships

- Structured Collaboration Time: Allocate specific times for faculty collaboration, such as during Flex Days or some other designated hours.
- Community-Building Initiatives: Create opportunities to foster stronger interpersonal relationships among faculty.

Sense of Belonging

- Student Voice Integration: Encourage faculty to use mid-semester feedback to adjust course practices and communicate changes to students.
- Inclusive Communication Strategies: Provide training on personalizing communication and creating inclusive teaching materials that resonate with diverse student populations.
- Humanizing Online and In-Person Classrooms: Share best practices for humanizing interactions in both face to face and online courses.

Institutional Support and Structural Challenges

- Streamline Administrative Tasks: Review non-teaching responsibilities that detract from instructional focus to see if they can be reduced.
- Review the Flex Program to see if more structured time can be captured to support collaboration
- Mental Health Support for Students: Provide training so faculty can provide appropriate referrals and focus on teaching.
- Technology Training: Enhance access to technology training for students

Community Engagement and Visibility

- Non-credit: Explore opportunities to align non-credit offerings with local community needs, such as adult education programs, workforce development, or personal enrichment courses.
- Celebrate Success: Explore wider promotion of Excellent Educator and other employee awards.