BOARD #167: We Don't Just Want to Talk: Professional Learning Communities with Action Oriented Approaches

Lara Chiaverini, University of Connecticut

Lara Chiaverini (she/her) is the Director of Staff and Faculty Impact & Belonging at UConn, a position she has held since 2023. In the Vergnano Institute for Inclusion (VII) within the College of Engineering, Lara leads initiatives focused on staff and faculty development, which includes creating learning communities and advancing the co-creation of meaningful assessments for effective and inclusive teaching practices in STEM education. Her work emphasizes diversity, equity, and inclusion in the STEM fields through innovative, evidence-based strategies and is driven by a commitment to enhancing equity in all learning and working spaces.

Lara has a diverse professional background that spans non-profit, legal, and educational sectors. She served as the Director of Development & Training at The Arc New London County, where she led grant writing efforts, cultivated community partnerships, and provided technology training. Her earlier roles include working as a Paralegal Advocate at the Connecticut Legal Rights Project, offering legal services to individuals with mental illness, and as Program Director at Literacy Volunteers of Greater New Haven, where she managed volunteer training and adult literacy programs. Additionally, Lara was a Site Manager for Jumpstart for Young Children, overseeing AmeriCorps members working with preschoolers to develop early literacy skills, and began her career as a Grant Writer at Action for Bridgeport Community Development.

Lara holds a Certificate in Paralegal Studies from the University of Hartford (2010) and a Bachelor's degree in English from the University of Connecticut (1999).

Dr. Stephany Santos, University of Connecticut

Stephany Santos is faculty in Biomedical Engineering at the University of Connecticut, with affiliate appointments in Engineering for Human Rights and Engineering Education. She is also the Executive Director and Endowed Chair of the Vergnano Institute for Inclusion in the UConn College of Engineering.

We Don't Just Want to Talk: Professional Learning Communities with Action-Oriented Approaches

Introduction:

In the evolving landscape of higher education, faculty members are looking for meaningful professional development, collaboration with peers, and ways to contribute to the overall mission of student success *[1]*. This is contrary to typical faculty development programming, which are one-time sessions lacking in opportunities for deep learning *[2]*. One structure gaining momentum is the Professional Learning Community (PLC), which brings faculty together to reflect on their practice, share expertise, and explore new teaching strategies or systemic issues. While traditional PLCs provide an avenue for professional growth, they often lack a clear expectation of action, limiting their potential impact. This paper explores the role of action-oriented PLCs in fostering a sense of agency among engineering or pre-engineering faculty and examines the ways in which increased agency can drive both individual and systemic change.

Research methods:

The term "Professional Learning Community" (PLC) refers to structured groups of faculty who intentionally come together to enhance their collective knowledge around a particular topic or issue. The focus of a PLC is on learning rather than teaching, working collaboratively, and holding oneself accountable for results [3] They often emphasizes reflection and dialogue through sharing experiences and engaging in intellectual discussion. While these activities are crucial for professional growth, at this university they often fall short of inspiring action or meaningful change in teaching practices, student engagement, or broader institutional practices. As faculty engage in reflective discussions, they may recognize areas for improvement, but without a clear mechanism for translating knowledge into action, their reflections remain theoretical.

There is an increasing call for an action-oriented approach, where the expectation is that faculty will not only share and learn from one another, but also translate those discussions into specific changes within their spheres of influence. The impetus for our study was to organically explore whether PLCs with a specific expectation of action foster a stronger sense of agency among faculty, and if so, how this sense of agency might impact other aspects of their professional roles.

Specifically, we seek to answer two central research questions:

1. Do faculty learning communities increase sense of agency?
2. Are there impacts on other aspects of a faculty member's role (i.e. committee assignments) if they do feel an increased sense of agency?

We explore these questions within the context of two PLCs launched at different campuses: one focused on faculty in the College of Engineering at the University of Connecticut's main campus in Storrs, CT, and the other an interdisciplinary PLC at UConn's regional campus in Stamford,

CT. Both groups are self-selected, with faculty attending out of intrinsic motivation rather than obligation.

The first PLC (PLC #1) includes faculty from three different departments within the College of Engineering. The group consists of tenure-track (research) faculty and teaching (non-tenure track) faculty. Participants have all worked at UConn less than six years, with the majority serving in their roles for less than three. Their individual goals center on improving teaching strategies, particularly related to large, lecture-based classes. Some hope to integrate more hands-on learning experiences, while others seek to improve student engagement through a better understanding of barriers to success.

The second PLC (PLC #2) at the UConn regional campus in Stamford, by contrast, involves faculty from a broad range of disciplines. These participants range in academic area, length of employment, and class size and structure. They come to the PLC with a collective interest in exploring how to best support the diverse needs of students, particularly in a setting where resources and institutional support are limited. Their goals include improving student engagement and sharing best practices for teaching students with a wide variety of academic backgrounds.

The facilitators borrowed from two frameworks to support the organic collaboration of participants to create, refine, and share tools, strategies, and best practices that advance their individual and shared goals [4]. The first framework, typically used in social work, harnesses empowerment theory to focus on how individuals, groups, and communities can gain control over their lives and improve their well-being by increasing their sense of power, autonomy, and self-efficacy. Emphasizing the interaction between personal, relational, and environmental factors, this framework encourages a bottom-up approach to change, where empowerment emerges through active participation and self-determination, rather than being imposed from the outside [5].

The facilitators of the PLCs took intentional and strategic steps to design a structure that moves beyond just reflective dialogue and into meaningful, actionable outcomes. The facilitators created an environment that encourages participants to engage deeply with the changes they wish to see in their teaching or professional practices. Rather than simply discussing challenges or ideas in a theoretical way, the groups are actively encouraged to identify specific areas of improvement, whether in pedagogy, collaboration, or other professional aspects. Once these areas are identified, the facilitators guide the participants through a structured process of reflection, goal-setting, and planning, providing the necessary support and resources to help bring these changes to fruition. This approach ensures that the discussions are not only thought-provoking but also lead to tangible transformations that participants can apply in their own contexts.

Faculty first identified what they wanted to change and what tools and strategies they already had and still need to make those changes tangible. Facilitators then weaved reflection on equity and inclusion into the conversation by first grounding the discussion in the diverse needs and experiences of students. Participants critically examined how systemic factors such as race, socio-economic status, gender, and disability may impact students' access to resources,

opportunities, and support. The groups explored how these barriers manifest in the classroom and hinder full participation.

The second framework, Glazkov's Four Needs Framework, is used to assess the impact PLCs have on participants' sense of agency. The facilitators gathered qualitative data from faculty members prior to the start of the PLC. This information serves as a baseline for change work and helped shape our approaches to guiding individual and collective growth.

The Four Needs Framework identifies four essential needs individuals have for well-being and personal development. These needs are framed as universal and critical for creating meaningful engagement and motivation in various contexts [6]. Additionally, the framework provides understanding of and movement along the lines of tension between each axis that commonly creates real or perceived barriers to change work [7].

Preliminary insights:

There are ten participants across the two learning communities, with the largest representation from the School of Computing. Other departments involved include Mechanical Engineering, Civil and Environmental Engineering, as well as faculty members working with pre-engineering students in the fields of Physics and Chemistry. Faculty range in years of service and experience participating in PLCs. A pre-participation survey collected insights on both personal and professional goals for attending the PLC. While personal outcomes varied within PLC #1, four out of five faculty members identified collaboration and networking with other faculty as their primary professional goals:

"I'm hoping to deepen my understanding of how my own biases and behaviors might contribute to inequality, and figure out how to challenge and change that in meaningful ways. I'd also like to connect with others who are committed to creating a more inclusive and respectful environment, both in and outside the classroom." Participant's personal outcome for participating in the PLC

"I want to build more inclusive teaching practices that can really support all students, especially those from underrepresented groups. I'd also like to collaborate with other faculty members on ways we can actively promote equity in our workspaces and classrooms. Ideally, I'd love to develop strategies to bring anti-racist practices into both my research and teaching." Participant's professional outcome for participation in the PLC

With both PLCs, common themes emerged around the desire to improve student engagement, particularly with culturally-conscious or culturally relevant lenses, and integrate new pedagogical approaches. In both cases, faculty identified barriers such as limited time for professional development, lack of institutional support for pedagogical innovation, and the challenge of overcoming longstanding teaching habits and departmental cultures. Mid-year survey data, which focused specifically on collective action, mirrored the pre-survey data echoing a desire to work collaboratively for greater impact:

"Through this collective action, I hope to learn how to create real, lasting change in my department and beyond. I want to build stronger connections with colleagues, share ideas, and

figure out ways to overcome challenges to equity and inclusion. Personally, I'm hoping to grow as a collaborator and leader while making sure that everyone—students and faculty alike—feels supported and has access to the same opportunities." Participant's personal outcome for collective action

In the mid-year survey, there was an increased articulation of the systemic barriers (beyond the typical barrier of time, lack of resources, etc.) that prevent success in reaching collective action outcomes including politics, risk, and emphasis on research outweighing teaching:

"The biggest challenge for me is balancing everything—teaching, research, and other responsibilities—while giving collective action the time and energy it deserves. Another hurdle is dealing with institutional systems that can be slow to change, which can feel frustrating at times. But I'm hopeful that working together as a group will help us find ways to push through these barriers." Participant's response regarding barriers preventing participation in collective action

These common themes extend to data collected at PLC#2, particularly around improving student engagement with culturally relevant approaches, and developing more inclusive teaching practices. Finally, informal data collected at both PLCs, such as attendance and completion of assigned tasks, highlight continued commitment and a strong desire to create meaningful, lasting change within their departments and beyond.

Challenges:

Measuring an increase in sense of agency proves to be difficult. The intersection of the faculty members' identities, including gender and race, as well as the established cultures on main and regional campuses is difficult to separate from PLC impact in the current data collected. Unlike more concrete metrics such as academic performance or retention rates, sense of agency is subjective, varies greatly, and is shaped by an interplay of personal, cultural, and institutional factors that are difficult to isolate and quantify. For instance, factors like departmental and institutional hierarchies, perceived institutional support, and even micro-level experiences of inclusion or exclusion may all contribute to an individual's sense of agency, and they are often experienced in deeply personal and context-dependent ways.

Conclusion:

Whether the PLC is focusing on collective action, where participants collaborate to identify a shared goal for change, collectively analyze the challenge, co-develop action steps, and implement the plan, or individual growth and action, allowing each member to tackle a personal challenge or opportunity specific to their classroom context, we are finding that faculty members are self-identifying ways to harness the agency they must make changes in their teaching practices. Facilitators attribute this to the support and accountability baked into the PLC through a concerted effort to build community. The preliminary findings from our study suggest that action-oriented PLCs can significantly enhance faculty members' sense of agency and that this increased agency can lead to meaningful changes in teaching, student engagement, and broader institutional practices. By shifting from a reflective, discussion-based model to one that

emphasizes concrete action and measurable outcomes, PLCs can provide faculty with the support and motivation needed to bring about real, sustainable change.

Works Cited

[1] A. T. Hilliard, "Practices And Value Of A Professional Learning Community In Higher Education," *Contemporary Issues in Education Research - Second Quarter,* pp. Volume 5, Number 2, 2012.

[2] J. A. Mooney, "Emergent Professional Learning Communities in Higher Education: Integrating Faculty Development, Educational Innovation, and Organizational Change at a Canadian College," *The Journal of Teaching and Learning,* pp. 38-53, 2018.

[3] R. Dufour, "What is a professional learing community," *Educational Leadership,* pp. 6-11, 2004.

[4] M. A. Zimmerman, "Empowerment Theory: Psychological, Organizational and Community Levels of Analysis," in *Handbook of Community Psychology*, Boston, MA, Springer, 2000, pp. 43-63.

[5] "Empowerment Theory in Social Work," 6 January 2021. [Online]. Available: https://onlinesocialwork.vcu.edu/blog/empowerment-theory-in-social-work/.

[6] D. Glazkov, "The Four Needs Framework," 23 February 2020. [Online]. Available: https://glazkov.com/2020/02/23/the-four-needs-framework/.

[7] D. Glazkov, "The tension between Agency and Belonging," 1 March 2020. [Online]. Available: https://glazkov.com/2020/03/01/the-tension-between-agency-and-belonging/.