Located outside Baltimore, Maryland, Towson University is the second largest university in the University System of Maryland. It has a reputation as a top teaching institution where students enjoy small class sizes and faculty are known for their commitment to teaching.

Over the past decade, in response to an increasingly diverse student population, the institution has had to rethink the ways it supports students. Like other institutions, Towson increased investments in a range of initiatives, including academic advising, tutoring and bridge programs, among others, to help students succeed – particularly low-income and first-generation students.

**FACULTY ARE KEY**

Previously, the decisions about how to support students were decentralized – driven by the faculty culture within each department. More recently, however, the culture has shifted to a more cross-institutional conversation. “This transition, led by our president, has brought about a change in the role for faculty,” said Jane Neapolitan, Ed.D., assistant provost in the Office of Academic Innovation.
“If faculty wanted to take part in these new ways of supporting students, they were going to have to expand out of their particular academic fields and consider ways their work could support students at an institution level. As a result, we had to help people change the way they thought about their work.”

To help faculty re-evaluate their own teaching and approaches to student success, Neapolitan’s team offered workshops, conferences and local topic-based learning communities for faculty. “While there is considerable value in these traditional approaches, we realized our goal was not just helping faculty learn new skills, but rather our job was to lay the foundation for communities to form and culture to be re-shaped,” said Neapolitan.

**FOUNDING PARTNER OF FACULTY GUILD**

Towson recognized it needed to consider new approaches to faculty development. “For real change to take hold, we had to think differently about ourselves. This is where Faculty Guild came in,” said Neapolitan. Beginning in spring 2018, Towson became a founding partner of Faculty Guild®. The university offered multi-term fellowships to 10 faculty members, including seven part-time faculty and three graduate students, primarily from biology, computer science and health professions. A year later, Towson has expanded the number of sponsored fellowships, bringing in faculty from psychology and communication studies.

The Faculty Guild concept is built on qualitative and quantitative research showing growth over time and change in faculty teaching practices as well as positive effects on student retention. “The model resembles what happened 30, 40, even 100 years ago in colleges where small groups of faculty came together for lunch to talk about students, share work and give advice to each other. In our fast-paced world, these connections are hard to foster. But with Faculty Guild, we are able to create a virtual department where faculty can communicate throughout the week. This changes the mindset and opens them to new ways of thinking. We can’t replicate this by ourselves at Towson,” said Neapolitan.

**STRUCTURED, RESULTS-GENERATING LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

Neapolitan highlights three aspects of the Faculty Guild approach to learning communities that are difficult for an institution to recreate on its own:

- **Robustness.** Working in cross-discipline, cross-institution communities, faculty are exposed to new ideas and resources that keep the focus on the pedagogy or teaching approaches rather than on academic content alone. “Many faculty have not been given the opportunity to study pedagogy in depth. Faculty Guild allows them the time and guidance to do that,” said Neapolitan.

- **Technology Affordances.** Fellows work together in small teams of 10 faculty members called *Teaching Circles*, led by a peer facilitator. Each week of the term, they work asynchronously in the Faculty Guild platform. “Leveraging technology makes it possible for all types of faculty to participate – including part-time faculty and graduate students who do not always have access to our campus-based professional development opportunities,” said Neapolitan.
**Data Richness.** Fellows are guided through a weekly reflection where they journal about a recent teaching experience. With the support of their Teaching Circle members, they tag their reflection with any of the 20 evidence-based instructional practices. These tags progressively build a Pedagogical Profile™ that illustrates how a faculty member is teaching. “The profile data convince faculty there is a real phenomenon going on here. Their teaching profile, and how it changes over time, is not a part of a typical faculty evaluation or assessment process. The data and its presentation provide a deeper evaluation that help faculty not feel judged and helps them grow,” said Neapolitan.

**EARLY RESULT MEASURES**

Now in the third term with Faculty Guild, Towson plans to formally evaluate the connection between the pedagogical data and student outcomes. Initially, Towson evaluated softer measures to gauge faculty acceptance. “At the end of the first term, we hosted a meeting attended by our fellows as well as our provost and several deans. When I heard the fellows speak, they were articulating teaching and learning in such a way that I knew it had been formed by their work in Faculty Guild. Each week, they are reading about it, writing about it, listening to others – it was showing up in their vocabulary and their confidence,” said Neapolitan.

Cognitive behavioral research shows if people change their thinking about something, it will more likely manifest itself in their behaviors and practices. “Rather than offering faculty an opportunity to learn new skills, with Faculty Guild, we are educating them on new concepts and new ways of looking at their teaching practices. It has to happen over time and includes developing a new language of pedagogy that elevates the discussion about instruction. They have the opportunity to rethink what the old was and develop their own way forward. In this way, their practice begins to change.”

“At the outset, our goal was to have a discourse informed by the research and science of teaching and learning. Most people on campuses today have not been exposed to it because they are experts in their respective academic disciplines. To get the conversation off the ground, however, you need a common language and you need data. It is clear that Faculty Guild is helping us create this culture,” concluded Neapolitan.

Interested in joining the Teaching Success Movement?

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