

**Transforming How We Teach: An Example of a Comprehensive
Institution-Wide Effort at Farmingdale State College SUNY**

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Farmingdale State College (FSC) was founded in 1912. Over the past 100 years, the institution has grown and evolved, morphing from one identity into another. Its first identity was as a public agricultural institute. By the late 1940’s (when FSC became part of the State University of New York System), the college had become a two-year vocational institution. And most recently, in a change that began incrementally in the late 1980’s and was completed in 2008, Farmingdale State College is now designated a four-year comprehensive college of applied arts and sciences. Located on Long Island in New York, FSC currently enrolls 7,000 students in 27 baccalaureate and 9 associate degree programs in its Schools of Arts and Sciences, Business, Engineering, and Health Sciences. 93% of the students are commuters, 30% are minority, the male/female ratio is 56% to 44%, and admissions are increasingly selective with only 49% of applicants accepted. There are 190 full-time tenure-track faculty, 36% of whom are untenured.

Of course, the most recent identity change from a two-year vocational institution to a 4-year comprehensive college requires much more than the drafting of a new mission statement. To be genuine and effective, mission change must be accompanied by thorough-going foundational changes—not only in the curriculum—but also in assessment, institutional research, services to students, faculty development, and pedagogy.

With the support of a five-year \$2-million Title III “Strengthening Institutions” grant from the U.S. Department of Education, FSC is currently undertaking a comprehensive strategic initiative that is designed to transform FSC into a more “learner-centered” institution that exhibits the following features:

- engaging pedagogies and first-year programs;
- a supportive environment that includes robust student orientation, developmental, and proactive academic advisement, mentoring, and support services;
- a “students first” ethos that pervades the hiring, orientation and development of faculty and staff;
- increased student engagement (e.g., through experiential learning, and co-curricular programs); and

- systematic tracking and documentation of student learning.
- continuous improvement and strategic planning that is supported by assessment data about student learning and institutional performance

Title III funding has enabled FSC to undertake a multi-dimensional “full-court press” to transform and strengthen the institution in each of the six vital areas listed above. This article highlights one of the efforts now underway to develop engaging pedagogies and to create a “students first” ethos at the heart of faculty development initiatives.

Using Title III funds, the College has created an internal competition—a “Students First Grants” program—that provides faculty with funding so that they can redesign courses and develop active student-centered pedagogies across the curriculum. These teaching grants are intentionally focused on courses that will enroll and serve incoming first-year students during their first semester on campus. Primary objectives are to engage new first-year students in their learning, to build community amongst students, and to foster connections between students, faculty, and staff. Our expectation is that, if we can give students an excellent start in their academic careers, then they will bond with other students, participate more in campus activities, succeed in their studies, continue from first to second year, and then on to third and fourth years. Ultimately, the objective is that FSC students will graduate from college at much higher rates than the current FSC rate of 20% in four years.

The “Students First Grants” in pedagogy consist of internal awards of \$2,500, plus up to an additional \$500 for student field trips or other class activities. The first competition began February 2011. Five grants for pedagogy were awarded to seven faculty members. The award winners proposed to develop the following types of collaborative pedagogies: learning communities, role-playing games (“Reacting to the Past”), problem-based learning, peer-led team building, and case-based learning. The companion co-curricular activities that the faculty planned included: field trips into New York City, tours and site visits, as well as discussions with professionals in the field. The technologies to be incorporated into the learning experiences included Angel (a course management system), Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Wikis, and audio-video presentations in smart classrooms. Finally, in order to get feedback for purposes of continuous improvement, the faculty planned a variety of newer assessment protocols, including the use of SALG (an NSF-funded on-line program for Student Assessment of Learning Gains), student portfolios, and various measures for continuous quantitative and qualitative evaluation of student learning.

The eight faculty members awarded teaching grants spent summer 2011 redesigning their courses and perfecting new pedagogies. Their efforts culminated in fall semester 2011 when the following recipients of Students First Grants for teaching debuted their revamped pedagogies:

- Larry Menna, Professor of History: “Reacting to the Past: Teaching American History as Living History”
- Sarbjit Singh, Assistant Professor of Business, Ann Shapiro, Professor of English, and Anthony T. Sovak, Visiting Assistant Professor of English: “Foundations for Growth: A Learning Community that combines English Composition with Introduction to Business Management”
- Orla Smyth LoPiccolo, Assistant Professor of Architecture and Construction Management: “Teaching First-Year Architecture Students Passive House Technology through Active Problem-Based Learning and Field Trips to Sustainable Buildings”
- George Fernandez, Assistant Professor of Visual Communication, and Laurie Rozakis, Professor of English: “Writing and Designing Your Future: A Learning Community that combines English Composition with Art and Graphic Design”
- Marie Pullan, Associate Professor of Computer Systems: “Building and Programming LEGO MINDSTORMS NXT 2.0 Robotics in the Introductory Computer and Information Systems Course”

123 members of the fall 2011 incoming class of 1,009 first-year students enrolled in one of the newly-revised courses. Each of these five examples of engaged pedagogy is examined in separate articles that appear in this edition of *Network*. There, the faculty members review their efforts to redesign their courses and to perfect their pedagogies. The authors also examine the student experiences and reactions to the more active, student-centered pedagogies. Finally, each author reports on assessment to date, reflecting on the direct and indirect results of their efforts to heighten both student engagement and student learning.

Overall, the results of the faculty efforts seem to have been transformative for the students involved. Both formal assessment and anecdotal evidence indicate the following:

- students are captivated by the more engaged learning experiences that their professors have orchestrated;
- they have formed communities and established bonds with each other;
- they often meet outside of class;
- they are more involved in campus activities;
- they have begun to volunteer to assist in campus projects such as Open House, even as first year students; and
- these students’ grades are higher than the control groups tracked in this study.

In addition, the faculty report new excitement about their teaching and are eager to repeat and perfect their courses and pedagogies in subsequent semesters. Indeed, all faculty awarded teaching grants are expected to repeat their courses at least three times in the four years after becoming recipients of a Students First Grant.

With 5-6 teaching grants awarded each year to individual faculty or to two-person learning community teams, the multiplier effect over the five years of the Title III funding will be significant. By 2015:

- **Faculty:** at least 35 of Farmingdale's 190 full-time faculty members will have been awarded Students First Grants for Teaching.
- **Courses:** These faculty members will have created 27 engaging pedagogy courses or learning communities for first-year students. As each course will be repeated in subsequent semesters, up to 162 newly-designed course sections will be offered during the 9 semesters from fall 2011 through fall 2015.
- **First-Year Students:** By fall 2015, 80% percent of FSC's incoming first-year students (or 800 students out of each new class of 1,000) will experience active learning in enriched courses during their first semester on campus.

When the results from the Students First Grants for Teaching are combined with a complex array of other initiatives funded by the Title III Strengthening Institutions award from the US Department of Education, by 2015, we expect that the campus culture of Farmingdale State College will have been transformed into the type of robust learner-centered institution worthy of its new mission as a comprehensive four-year polytechnic college. Furthermore, the most important anticipated result is the following: students at Farmingdale State College (SUNY) will become markedly engaged on campus, make friends, succeed academically, and graduate.

In conclusion, it is beneficial to identify the "take aways" from FSC's experience for administrators and faculty leaders who work to encourage and promote engaged pedagogies across the curricula on their campuses. Here are some basic lessons:

- **First:** external funding can be a catalyst, but is not a requirement for accomplishing the desired change. Certainly, capturing a competitive Title III grant from the U.S. government—or other significant outside award—provides resources that permit a college or university to undertake a serious transformation. However, one can undertake significant pedagogical initiatives without outside funding.

- Second: faculty development is essential. The Faculty Resource Network offers outstanding seminars where faculty can learn about new ways of teaching. Indeed, some of those awarded Students First Grants at FSC developed their proposals with inspiration from FRN seminars and annual symposia. Beyond FRN opportunities, each campus should create and enhance its internal centers and programs for faculty development. The new and rapidly-evolving resources for faculty development at FSC can be seen at: www.farmingdale.edu/titleIIIresources.
- Third: an internal grants competition that entices faculty to experiment and develop newer pedagogies is an effective, and relatively inexpensive, tool for encouraging curricular and pedagogical transformation. As seen from the FSC case, an investment of \$2,500 per award can produce profound, ongoing, and lasting effects. Provosts and deans would be wise to prioritize their budgets so that new funding for faculty development becomes a permanent component of each annual budget.
- Fourth: once internal funding is identified and guaranteed, then procedures for internal teaching awards (with applications, guidelines, deadlines, peer review selection committee) should be developed and administered. At Farmingdale, our applications and procedures replicate on a smaller scale the grant application processes required in US government and other external grant competitions. The FSC Students First Grant applications and guidelines can be accessed at: www.farmingdale.edu/titleIIIresources. By competing in an internal competition, our faculty members practice how to prepare for the much larger and more competitive grant applications required by external funders. In short, another aspect of faculty development, grant writing, is promoted through our internal competition.
- Finally, strategic planning is key. One needs a vision to guide innovative efforts. One also needs effective administrative leadership (from the president on down) to accomplish the transformative changes in the ways we teach that are demanded by the new realities of the 21st century.