The Teaching Excellence & Innovation Extraordinary Education Task Force presents the following report of activities in conjunction with Minnesota State University, Mankato’s integrated academic planning of 2014-15. While unanimity of task force members was not reached with respect to each recommendation, all task force participants had a voice in the creation of our shared report.

Charge

The Teaching Excellence and Innovation Task Force was charged with identifying high potential strategic directions and goals that will advance teaching excellence, learning, and innovation at Minnesota State University, Mankato for the period of 2015-2018. As a part of this charge, the task force addressed:

- What would a new level of greatness in teaching excellence, learning and innovation look like by 2018, and how will we know if it is achieved?
- What would be a model organizational structure and function; policies, procedures, and practices to support the strategic directions and goals?

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Summary of Process

The Teaching Excellence & Innovation Task Force (TEITF) started meeting on April 17, 2014. All TEITF members received a copy of Ken Bain’s book, What the Best College Teachers Do (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) as a common read to prepare for our tasks. We then met every Thursday for the remainder of spring semester. Early on, the TEITF determined that teaching excellence and innovation was the responsibility of three principle entities: the faculty, the students, and the institution as a whole.

On May 16, 2014, the committee met for a daylong retreat to dedicate ourselves to the task force charge. We divided ourselves into subgroups focused on each entity. Each subgroup identified resources (e.g., websites, research articles, books, data or best practices) that would inform our discussions and brainstormed ideas and examples of teaching excellence and innovation. Following the retreat, subgroups began sketching out recommendations relative to students, faculty, or institution. In the fall semester 2014, the TEITF met every Thursday, either in our subgroups or as a whole. In these meetings, the recommendations began to take shape. These sketches and discussions created the foundation of the four recommendations we present in this report.
The TEITF adopted the following working definitions.

**Excellence in teaching and learning** is dynamic and involves the intersection of commitment from the institution, the faculty and the student.

The **faculty** brings passion, content, and pedagogy.

The **student** brings openness, work ethic, and energy.

The **institution** brings resources, space and structure.

**Innovative teaching** is the freedom to test new and improved instructional methods in order to advance student learning. It may involve traditional and new technology to advance learning outcomes, but it does not employ technology for technology’s sake. Innovative teaching is responsive to student needs, faculty development, and university resources. It is nimble and can readily adapt to a rapidly changing learning environment. Innovative teaching embraces multiple pathways to success. Innovative teaching helps students appreciate the value in taking risks, think independently, and forge their own educational paths.

Within the following section, we have supported our main recommendations with specific, actionable recommendations and examples or suggestions for implementation. To facilitate cross-referencing of these recommendations, we have used a three-level numbering system. These numbers do not suggest a hierarchy or prioritization within the recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION #1: INCREASE FACULTY ENGAGEMENT TO TRANSFORM EFFECTIVE TEACHING INTO EXCELLENT AND INNOVATIVE TEACHING.

Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) programs help faculty transform effective teaching into excellent and innovative teaching and provide opportunities for localized deployment of content specific approaches. CETL can curate, organize, and mentor faculty in the delivery of pedagogical best practices and innovations, particularly for online, hybrid, and other innovative course formats. It can also support the ranks of adjunct faculty who teach over 20% of our general education and diverse cultures courses taught by providing orientation information and mentoring opportunities.

**Alignment**
- MnSCU Strategic Framework 1, 2
- MSU Action Step 3, 5

**Specific Recommendations**

1.1 Increase faculty engagement with the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) and create interdisciplinary professional learning communities to support faculty professional development, student advising, and teaching excellence and innovation.

1. Create an infrastructure and lasting support for Professional Learning Communities at the institutional and local levels. Potential focus of these Professional Learning Communities include Multigenerational Learning, The 21st Century Student, Creating Student Centered Learning Environments, Using Technology to Reach Your Learning Goal, and Meeting the Needs of All Students in Your Classroom, and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).
2. Increase engagement with evidence-based online teaching and learning strategies.
3. Increase opportunities to learn about teaching and working with diversity.
4. Examine current and past CETL offerings, as well as CETL models at other universities, to strategically identify gaps to plan programs, certificates, and learning communities in the future.

1.2 Continue to provide resources and support for faculty teaching and learning.
1. Create programming and curriculum for adjunct and graduate teaching assistant onboarding support.
2. Develop content-based pedagogical expertise within departments and colleges.
3. Strengthen partnerships between the Library, IT and CETL to provide faculty with resources and support to transform teaching.
4. Provide stipends and/or release time to teams of faculty to develop and share innovative and effective teaching strategies to engage students and improve student learning.

Impact & Obstacles
- **Resources:** As utilization of CETL certificate programming increases beyond current capacity, resources (staffing, equipment, facilities) will have to increase proportionately. Make resources available to faculty who are off campus and work outside of the 8-5 business day.
- **Evaluation:** Mechanisms for evaluation methods need to be developed to provide evidence of effectiveness.
- **Collaboration:** CETL would also require the partnership and buy-in from administration, deans, and departments in the development of content-based pedagogical expertise.

References


**RECOMMENDATION #2:** BECOME A PARTNER FOR LIFE IN OUR STUDENTS’ EDUCATION.

In recent years the University has embraced “Big ideas. Real-world thinking.” as a core theme for the University. To help students meet this challenge, we need to create an environment that prepares our students to be successful learners and to become leaders for the future. We should help our students and alumni embrace the path of life-long learning and continuous professional development by creating opportunities to learn at any stage of their lives.

**Alignment**
- MnSCU Strategic Framework 1 & 2.
Specific Recommendations

2.1 Extend orientation for all students.
1. Create self-paced instructional materials for all students to access immediately upon admission and throughout their first year of enrollment to complement the on-campus orientation.
2. Create an orientation site or digital handbook for graduate, transfer, online and Extended Education students.
3. Include information about holistic student learning, work-school-life balance, budgeting, etc. as a complement to First Year Experience.
4. Provide access to university services 24/7 to accommodate non-traditional student schedules.

2.2 Support the whole learner through educational, personal, and professional development activities.
1. Increase participation in First Year Experience to teach academic and life success skills. Require first year experience as a general education component, either with or without learning communities. Standardize the FYE curriculum to include topics such as how to study and learn in college, academic planning and advising engagement with the campus community, basic information literacy components, including a tool for digital literacy assessment, how online study differs from classroom study, independent and informal learning, and managing finances.
2. Encourage courses in the general education curriculum to support a “gradual release of responsibility” learning model by which initial instruction is highly supported by faculty, but later instruction gradually shifts control of the learning and development to students.
3. Establish trained Student Learning Mentors to assist with classes with enrollment of over 50 students. These mentors will help undergraduates learn how to study for the course, be an informational resource, and bring a sense of belonging to courses with large enrollment.
4. Promote appreciation of human diversity, civic engagement, self-directed learning and reflection, ethics, creativity, communication, leadership, and management skills within all programs.
5. Integrate information literacy as defined by the discipline into student learning outcomes of all academic programs.
6. Create support structures for graduate student teaching and learning.

2.3 Identify and prepare leaders with diverse backgrounds, strengths, and experiences.
1. Develop mechanisms for identifying potential leaders at the graduate and undergraduate level within the diverse student body.
2. Develop opportunities for student leaders to study, reflect, and practice skills in a wide range of authentic experiences addressing local, state, national, and global issues.
3. Expand leadership-training opportunities for students similar to the program developed for the Presidential Scholars.

2.4 Offer flexible, creative and innovative educational pathways outside of the traditional degree formats.
1. Create opportunities for more interdisciplinary programs or customized certificates to allow students to capitalize on their strengths and engage in areas of interest and passion that may not fit into existing major/minor/certificate models.
2. Create certificates in topics of high need (including professional competencies) to allow alumni and community members to update existing or learn new content, theory, skills, and procedures.
3. Expand and coordinate the study abroad and study away opportunities within the United States in order to help create global awareness.
Impact & Obstacles

- **Paradigm shift**: Breaking the mold of a traditional four-year undergraduate or two-year master’s degree to focus on learner outcomes and the successful demonstration of knowledge, skills, and competencies. Creating a new way to provide learning, professional development, and ongoing relationships after a student leaves the university.

- **Collaboration**: Interdisciplinary and more holistic focus on skills rather than courses within a single department. Creation of deeper, sustainable partnerships among faculty, students, alumni, the workforce and the community.

- **Easy button**: Make education accessible by removing obstacles in registration, financial aid, and other administrative functions that are currently barriers to students, thereby making it quick and easy to sign up for courses.

References


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**RECOMMENDATION #3: PROVIDE INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUPPORT FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING EXCELLENCE AND INNOVATION.**

Teaching excellence should be recognized and defined beyond the confines of a faculty member’s individual professional development plan; students need resources that would help move their learning from good to great; and services available on campus should be focused on the institutional mission of promoting learning. Recognizing the success of the Center for Excellence and Innovation in supporting faculty, the University should pursue the creation of a Student Learning Innovation Center to support and promote student learning.

**Alignment**
Strategic Priority 5, Goals 1, 2, and 3
Specific Recommendations

3.1 Recognize innovation and excellence in teaching and learning at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

1. Identify, recognize, celebrate, and promote best practices that support excellence in teaching and learning for a wide range of students and offer opportunities for faculty to explore and develop these practices in their classes.
2. Provide institutional incentives, including funding and one-time monies, for the transformative adoption of new and innovative teaching and learning processes.
3. Recognize and reward faculty and teams of faculty who demonstrate innovation and excellence in teaching with a university-level award on par with the Distinguished Faculty Scholars. The MnSCU Excellence in Curriculum Programming may also serve as a model for this type of recognition.
4. Recognize teaching excellence and innovation in diversity and equity topics.

3.2 Support student technology and learning skills.

1. Develop a student version of the Center for Excellence and Innovation. This center, which we tentatively call the Student Learning Innovation Center (SLIC), would be in a central location where students can get assistance with learning strategies and technology training. This resource would provide students with a basic set of technology skills and would also be fully accessible to distance learners.
2. Connect SLIC and CETL to synergize their efforts to address excellence in teaching and student learning.

3.3 Streamline scheduling processes to ensure that undergraduate students can complete their degrees within four years.

1. Offer enough sections of ENG 101 to ensure that all eligible incoming first-year students are able to enroll in the course during their first year of enrollment. Institutional data suggest that students who take ENG 101 in their first year are more likely to finish undergraduate degrees within four years than students who wait until their second year.
2. Use existing and new technology (e.g., Agile Grad, registration wait lists) to inform the scheduling of classes and decisions about class offerings. Explore the option of pre-registering for more than one semester.
3. Explore a change to course scheduling (e.g., MWF 50 minutes, TTh 75 minutes, common start times) to maximize the use of classroom space and eliminate overlapping courses across colleges.

3.4 Continue to develop student study and gathering spaces and collaborative classroom spaces.

1. All remodeling and new construction of academic spaces should include student study and gathering spaces, such as the Crossroads in Morris Hall, the student lobby in Ford Hall, and the technology cubicles on first floor of Wigley.
2. Consider flexible and collaborative classroom layouts in newly constructed and renovated academic buildings. Classrooms must be built or renovated to accommodate multiple purposes, departments, and teaching styles.

3.5 Bring “Real World Thinking” into the classroom and the classroom into the world.

1. Improve coordination between academics, Strategic Partnerships, internships, and service learning opportunities in order to connect the community with programs throughout the university.
2. Review University and MnSCU policies and procedures to identify and streamline policies, practices, and procedures that inhibit and hinder excellence in teaching and adoption of innovation, such as the contract process for outside speakers and consultants, study abroad, etc.
3. Help faculty identify potential guest speakers, case studies, and ideas for collaborative research projects.
4. Provide resources for faculty to incorporate diversity topics into all courses, not just those designated as meeting the Diverse Cultures Graduation Requirement.
5. Help community partners develop and improve internships, recruiting, and projects through service learning and civic engagement.

3.6 Create a Strategic & Technology Innovation Plan in partnership with Division of ITS and the University Technology Roundtable.
1. Create a flexible and sustainable technology infrastructure.
2. Help faculty identify instructional technologies and innovations that support the goals of their teaching.
3. Foster the growth of all faculty and staff in the adoption of appropriate instructional technologies and innovations.
4. Develop a technology vision to support faculty and student success; strive for continuous service and process improvement; build relationships, partnerships, and communication through professional and effective staff; and provide superlative access to data.

3.7 Collect, analyze, and share data to holistically identify students' assets in content knowledge and life skills.
1. Use and reflect on an array of demographic data to improve instruction and curriculum, and to encourage student self-reflection, growth, and development.
2. Work with community and industry partners to identify core knowledge, skills, and professional competencies that should be included in our curricula.
3. Assess students' growth from admission to graduation so that student progress toward self-directed, healthy learning is monitored and promoted. Students should also understand how to self-assess and monitor their own growth, development, and progress toward their goals.
4. Promote mechanisms that alert faculty and staff about students who are at risk so that interventions can be implemented in a timely manner.

Impact & Obstacles
- **Procedures**: Develop nomination criteria and application requirements for identifying instances of teaching excellence and innovation. Develop a rubric for measuring teaching excellence and innovation in its many forms.
- **Resources**: Increased human and financial resources to support teaching and learning in the numerous institutional areas identified.
- **Diversity**: All efforts to improve teaching and learning must be inclusive and equity-minded.

References


RECOMMENDATION #4: ENSURE EQUITY IN EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES.

4.1 If we do it on campus, we must do it online and at a distance.

Conclusion & Future Considerations

The work of the Teaching Excellence & Innovation Task Force, while final, is certainly only the beginning of a crucial conversation that Minnesota State Mankato campus students, faculty, and staff must have regarding the future of our pedagogies and instructional practices. The four groups of recommendations elaborated here (increase faculty engagement to transform effective teaching into excellent and innovative teaching; become a partner for life in our students’ education; provide infrastructure and support for teaching and learning excellence and innovation; and if we do it on campus we, we must do it online and at a distance) represent our best, most informed hypotheses about what will serve our students in the next three years. We do not doubt that another group of stakeholders might have come up with different recommendations. The most important principle is that the planning took place, that the conversations were held, and that the ideas were discussed, sometimes passionately. While a number of the recommendations the task force made require considerable resources, this cost will be offset by greater student success. It is also true that a number of the recommendations made are low cost with the potential of high impact on teaching excellence and innovation. We urge the university to begin implementation of these recommendations in a timely manner.