

**Guide to
The University of Arizona Learning Initiative
Faculty Learning Communities, Version 2
October 2017**



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Overview:

The Guide to The University of Arizona Learning Initiative Faculty Learning Communities serves to define and document the mission, goals, evaluation plans, and implementation strategies.

The overarching goal of The University of Arizona Learning Initiative Faculty Learning Communities (UALI FLCs) is to improve the quality of teaching and learning at The University of Arizona. This is accomplished through a focus on pedagogy, faculty professional development, and student learning. Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) are an approach that have positive effects on teaching development, including course redesign, satisfaction with teaching, and instructors' understanding of how students learn (Condon, Iverson, Manduca, Rutz & Willit, 2016). The UALI FLCs consist of small groups of faculty from diverse disciplines who meet regularly over a semester (or longer in some cases) to explore best practices for improving teaching and student learning with colleagues. Learning specialists, academic advisors, and graduate teaching assistants may also be a part of the FLCs. FLCs provide an opportunity for instructors to learn about, discuss, practice, and assess teaching practices demonstrated to be most effective in helping students learn. FLCs help to increase the campus-wide interest in teaching and learning, provide a community of support and encouragement, and encourage faculty to contribute to the research and scholarship of student learning. The FLCs demonstrate the University of Arizona's commitment to a culture that embraces evidence-based, learner-centered teaching.

Mission Statement:

The Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) consist of instructors across campus who share one ideal: providing the best educational experience for their students. Each semester, instructors meet in small groups to network and learn more about how to accomplish their teaching goals. These meetings are facilitated by faculty members who have skills and knowledge to contribute. The FLCs foster the professional development of the University of Arizona's teaching communities by offering members an opportunity to:

- 1) Investigate how students learn, how to teach in accord with principles of learning, and how to incorporate these principles in course design, implementation, and assessment.
- 2) Identify evidence-based pedagogical approaches that can be adapted to their discipline.
- 3) Demonstrate creativity in developing and practicing evidence-based pedagogy in teaching.
- 4) Learn how to create an inclusive environment where all learners can succeed.
- 5) Network with colleagues across disciplines in order to develop and refine a collaborative and interdisciplinary perspective of teaching.

The UALI FLC program is regularly assessed to ensure that it remains a valuable resource to promote and facilitate teaching and learning at The University of Arizona.

Goals:

The specific goals for the individual members as well as the institution are listed below.

As a result of their participation in the FLCs, members will:

1. Increase their understanding of how students learn and use their understanding to facilitate student learning.

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2. Increase their knowledge, development, and application of evidence-based practices in course design.
3. Gain new skills by participating in peer observations, reflections, and follow-up discussions.
4. Foster a network of evidence-based teaching faculty across campus.
5. Gain awareness of and increase attention to diversity and inclusion.
6. Increase or reinforce their interest in and enthusiasm for evidence-based teaching.

As a result of the UALI FLC program, The University of Arizona strives to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the institution. The specific institutional goals are to:

1. Increase instructors' interest in evidence-based teaching and student learning.
2. Increase the use of evidence-based teaching and learning strategies (student-centered learning, formative assessment, etc.).
3. Support teaching resources such as FLCs as a means to instructional improvement and student success.
4. Advance an institutional culture that embraces evidence-based teaching and learning.
5. Advance University-wide attention to diversity, accessibility, and inclusion (Inclusive Excellence) in teaching to ensure that all students are succeeding.

Organizational Structure:

The Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) are designed to benefit instructors of all appointment types, including tenured, tenure-track and non-tenure eligible faculty, at all levels of their careers and from all disciplines across campus. Participants are invited to join an FLC through a variety of channels including listservs that target faculty who previously participated in FLCs or other education-related professional-development opportunities. In addition, invitations to join are included in general newsletters and other communications sent to all instructional faculty to reach a broader audience. To help interested faculty to select a suitable group, FLC facilitators suggest areas of interest and topics that may be included in their group discussions. Examples of FLC topics include: student learning in small classroom settings, student learning in large collaborative classroom settings and how to assess student learning. The groups of 6-10 participants are formed based on common interests and availability.

FLC members who demonstrate significant interest and commitment to the FLCs are invited to act as facilitators. Studies show that successful leadership has a broad base with diverse members (Smith, et al. 2004). Our goal is to align the selection of facilitators with the findings of these studies. In many cases, new facilitators work with an experienced facilitator, which promotes cross-fertilization of ideas regarding strategies for effective sessions. Prior to the start of the semester, the FLC facilitators hold a strategy meeting to discuss specifics about how the FLCs will be conducted. Although this guide provides information about best practices for FLC facilitation, facilitators and participants make many decisions about how the groups are managed. Details regarding recruitment of FLC members and facilitators are provided in the Policies and Procedures which are available on the UALI website.

Once formed, the groups meet approximately seven times throughout the semester. A kick-off meeting for all FLC members is held early in the semester. The kick-off focuses on a topic of general interest. Some examples of previous kick-off topics include "Helping Students to be Better Learners" and "Creating Learning Environments with Inclusive Excellence in Mind." A wrap-up session, also for all FLC members, is conducted at the end of the semester and is often hosted by The University of Arizona

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Center for University Scholarship (CUES). In the past, CUES has hosted workshops facilitated by outside experts for the wrap-up.

The Faculty Learning Communities website, <http://academicaffairs.arizona.edu/flc>, contains useful information including contact information for FLC members and facilitators, schedules for FLC events and meetings, shared resources, and links to other helpful sites.

Evaluation and Assessment:

The FLCs employ an action-oriented approach that is initiated from questions that participants have about teaching and learning. Assessment of the UALI FLC program begins with a needs/interest assessment of each group at the start of the semester. Outcomes assessment includes the collection, compilation and analysis of data gathered from surveys, FLC meeting observations and FLC Member Reflections. Longitudinal data on past participants is collected at least annually to assess long-term impact. Data sources and collection schedules are described in detail in the separate Assessment Plan, available at: <http://academicaffairs.arizona.edu/flc>.

Implementation Strategies:

Based on the mission and goals of UALI FLCs, some basic engagement strategies are implemented similarly for all of the small-group settings. However, the way these strategies are framed and organized vary in each small group as determined by the facilitators. The discussion topics in each group may be based on a theme of general interest to the campus community or a more specific collective interest of the members of a group. Facilitators typically survey the group to determine their interests and goals, which may include:

1. **Scholarly Exploration:** A core element of FLC meetings is the learning about the scholarship of teaching and learning and discussing its practical implementation in a supportive environment among diverse colleagues. The group may read and critique scholarly manuscripts, scientific literature from peer reviewed journals, or essays from the Chronicle of Higher Education and teaching blogs, for instance. A list of resources that have proven helpful for FLC members are available at: <http://academicaffairs.arizona.edu/uali>.
2. **Diversity and Inclusion Practices:** Inclusiveness is a core value for interaction in the FLCs. Aspects for discussion and practice may include creating a sense of community and safe learning environment; critical thinking and perspective-taking; accessibility; inclusive design; inclusive direct and tech-supported communication strategies; and productive collaboration.
3. **Community-Building:** FLC facilitators assist with creating a sense of community within the small groups and the larger University population of instructors, understanding that there are others on campus with a strong desire to increase and improve student learning outcomes. Participating in the FLCs provides a structure of support for people who want to focus on evidence-based practices in their teaching, whether or not the focus on teaching is supported in their units. FLCs encourage collaboration across disciplines.
4. **Peer Observations:** Having instructors within the FLCs observe each other improves teaching practices for both parties by offering intentional, formative feedback on practice.
 - a. This may be accomplished with observations in physical and online environments. Peer observations are encouraged within the small groups. Those interested, are invited to

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reach out to members of other FLCs to allow for observations outside the small groups to help with potential scheduling conflicts and allow more choice.

- b. FLC members might apply specific techniques or strategies and choose to demonstrate them in short video segments from self-made recordings or recordings made by a peer or FLC facilitator. The videos can be shared for instructional use within the FLC program.
5. Informal Showcasing: Within their small groups, each member explains or demonstrates at least one active-learning technique or activity they are using in the given semester or have used before.
6. Reflective Practice: Facilitators encourage members to keep an FLC learning log in order to prepare a written reflection. Common questions are provided; each group is encouraged to develop additional questions based on the interests of the members.
7. Faculty Leadership: Within the small groups, members will discuss ideas and strategies for assisting their departments to promote awareness of the complexity of teaching and learning, to discuss FLCs and what can be learned, and to share their excitement about student learning.

Each group may organize their meetings differently, but every group has a structure and well-defined goals. During meetings, facilitators moderate the sessions by initiating tasks and procedures; ensuring relevance and confidentiality of the conversations; clarifying and contributing ideas, facts, and examples; moderating and encouraging everyone's engagement; consolidating, compromising, and offering conclusions. Facilitators are encouraged to share the unique endeavors of their groups with the FLC coordinator.

Policies and Procedures:

The UA Learning Initiative website contains the Policies and Procedures for establishing and implementing the FLC program as well as guidelines for providing on-going support and evaluation of the established program. It is anticipated that the UALI FLC Program may provide a model for other institutions that wish to implement similar programs.

Summary:

The UA Learning Initiative Faculty Learning Communities provide an important professional development opportunity for faculty who are committed to quality education and aspire to effectively and consistently incorporate evidence-based instructional practices in their courses. This guide is intended as a resource to ensure that the UALI FLC program achieves the intended goals.

References:

Condon, William, et al. *Faculty Development and Student Learning : Assessing the Connections*, Indiana University Press, 2016.

Smith, B.L, MacGregor, J., Matthews, R., & Gabelnick, F. (2004). *Learning communities: Reforming undergraduate education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.