

ACE QEP Retreat

Davis Mountains Education Center
Ft. Davis, Texas
April 24-25, 2009

Participants: Sandra Chambers, Chris Garcia, Rudy Kittlitz, Jason Leyva, Robbie Ray, Clare Ritzi, Kathy Stein, and Julie Vega

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Retreat Evaluations: I asked the faculty to complete their evaluations and to place them in a sealed envelope. I shared that I would be sending them on to you (as the sponsors of the retreat). I wanted them to feel free to share whatever they felt about the retreat without worrying about my response.

Pictures: Clare Ritzi has the electronic copies of the pictures taken at the retreat.

Retreat Exercises

Note: See Retreat Agenda Moderator Notes for explanations of the exercises.

Exercise One: "Trust Thy Instructor"

Objectives:

- 1) To get the instructors out of their comfort zones by asking them to engage in an outdoor exercise.
- 2) To get the instructors to think about how much our students trust us to provide them with good information.
- 3) To help the instructors remember that even when we are giving the best instructions we can to individuals who are trying as hard as they can, sometimes our communications are not as efficient as we would like to think they are.

Observations:

- 1) Every ten minutes we would stop to journal about our roles in the exercise. Some of the faculty had real difficulties in transferring skills from the indoor setting to the outdoor setting. Some individuals tried to spend more time discussing how they were supposed to write out of doors than actually writing. The moderators had to keep reminding people that they needed to figure out a coping strategy.
- 2) Most of the participants spoke to how disconcerted they felt to give up so much control (as they were led blindfolded on an outdoor walk) as they had to trust the Scout and the Guide to keep them safe and to get them to where they were supposed to go. They all agreed that we trust each other, but it's one thing to say that you trust someone and something entirely different to feel that trust during the experience. The instructors easily transposed their feelings to how many of their students may be feeling in their classes.
- 3) Everyone agreed that taking a class outdoors will require more preparation beforehand. Also, back-up plans need to be considered should the weather become an issue.

Exercise Two: SRSU and ACE Exam

Objectives:

- 1) To familiarize the ACE faculty with the available data concerning ACE students.
- 2) To help identify the areas where we need to have ongoing data collection taking place.
- 3) To address fears of some faculty members concerning what they are being held responsible for as instructors.
- 4) To identify areas that may be impacting our success rates.
- 5) To brainstorm ways to counteract such impacts.

Observations:

- 1) The “exam” was met with more hostility than I had anticipated by a couple of participants. Faculty asked if they were expected to know this kind of information. I told them that they were. We can’t fix anything if we don’t know what’s broke.
- 2) As we talked about the different pieces of information shared as we went over the exam answers, I was able to make the point that people are not being held responsible for their students not passing. There can a myriad of reasons why students fail. However, they do have to create an atmosphere in their classroom that supports students so that even if they leave with a failing grade, they know that when they are ready to commit and succeed, we’ll be here to help them. As the discussion continued, the hostility levels went down.
- 3) We all agreed that if we’re going to make changes to our program (QEP and software), the we need to have base line data for comparison purposes.

Exercise Three: “Critical Thinking Rubric: Students”

Objectives:

- 1) To encourage faculty members to become familiar with *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools* and intellectual traits.
- 2) To allow the faculty to assess the intellectual traits of their students.
- 3) To discuss those intellectual traits.

Observations:

- 1) The faculty, on average, and in most categories, ranked the students as having poor intellectual skills.
- 2) I was able to direct the discussion to the reasons why they think our students have such poor intellectual skills and what can we do to help them develop their intellectual skills.

Exercise Four: ACE QEP Classroom Activity Reports

Objectives:

- 1) To share ways in which we can take our Developmental Education courses outdoors.
- 2) To share specific activities that we plan to use with our classes in Fall 2009.
- 3) To write up those activities so that ACE can keep a binder of those activities available for instructors to peruse as they try to think of new ways to include the outdoors and critical thinking into their classes.

Observations:

- 1) Everyone had at least one activity to share with the group. In all but one case, they made good sense to the group at large. All were well received.
- 2) The faculty expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for each other’s activities. I was pleased with the manner in which they riffed off of each other’s ideas and extrapolated other ways in which the lessons could be extended. They also helped each other problem solve the various logistical issues associated with implementing their activity.

Exercise Five A and Five B: "In the Mirror" (Before we broke for the evening, the faculty were given the homework of assessing themselves using the Critical Thinking Rubric: Faculty. They were also asked to read the article "The Power of Hope.")

Objectives:

- 1) To look within themselves and honestly assess their own intellectual traits.
- 2) To consider how their strengths and weaknesses compare to their students'.
- 3) To contemplate the concept of hope and the role of emotion and belief in the process of learning.

Observations:

- 1) When the conversation started, the first speaker self-rated as "Good" at everything. The initial response of the others reflected this point of view along the lines of "We are the instructors at an institution of higher education. Of course, we're intellectually stronger than our students." (Please note, no one used the word "superior." I use the word to convey the tone of that moment.) Then one of the faculty members shared s/he felt her/his skill was poor in a specific area and why. The entire atmosphere shifted. A silent whoosh went through the room and all but one of the instructors admitted to an area where they could see themselves needing to grow. This felt like a big breakthrough moment for the faculty.
- 2) We had quite a long discussion about the meaning of "critical thinking." One group member in particular seems to feel the word is an example of jargon and that it has no meaning. However, the discussion was good, and we did have a nice discussion of Bloom's taxonomy and how critical thinking fits within that concept.
- 3) When the discussion began about "The Power of Hope," the attitude conveyed by some in the group was that once students get to college, they are responsible for their own education – end of story. I shared that my perspective is that all of the research tells us that Developmental Education faculty in particular must teach more than just content. We must reach the student where the student is, not where we want him/her to be. We have to be willing to open ourselves to the lives of our students in order to get them to trust us enough to be willing to try to learn the content of our classes. If nothing else, the faculty is now very aware of my expectations of each of us. By the end of the discussion, I believe that we all agreed that we can make or break a student. Our goal should be to help our students make it. ACE must not be an additional barrier to students. We have to be part of their success. We'll see how this idea manifests itself in the semesters to come.
- 4) I do believe that all of the faculty got a better sense of how they are viewed by others, how ACE is viewed on campus, and what we need to do to insure that we are an asset to students.

Exercise Six: "Picture, Picture"

Objectives:

- 1) To experience the difficulties involved in completing a complicated operation when we only have another individual's directions to help us be successful.
- 2) To learn the ways in which we do not share information as well as we should.
- 3) To identify the language styles which were more effective for conveying information

Observations:

- 1) The math faculty tended to use very concrete language that was often not as descriptive as one might have assumed.
- 2) The languages faculty tended to use more abstract and metaphorical language that was not as descriptive as one might have assumed.
- 3) We are all smart people, yet even so, the point was made multiple times that what we mean and what we say is not always exactly what our audience hears. If we, with all of our degrees, had difficulty effectively communicating new information to each other, then don't we have to seriously work at being patient with our students as they attempt to decipher what we mean?
- 4) It was quite interesting watching and listening to the ways information was shared by the narrators as they shared information with the artists. It was gratifying how honest the faculty members were with each other when their methods were not as successful as they thought they should have been. Several instructors had verbal "aha!" moments during this activity.

Exercise Seven: ACE Mission Statement

Objectives:

- 1) To review the mission statements of other institutions.
- 2) To develop a succinct mission statement for ACE that reflects our commitment to our students and their success as well as to the intellectual integrity of the courses that we teach.

Observations:

- 1) We seemed to bog down for a few minutes about the efficacy of the mission statements that we were looking at; however, that discussion allowed us to segue about the concepts that we value.
- 2) Those values include honoring our students as individuals, committing ourselves to their success as individuals and as students in our classes, and understanding the role that our developmental education program plays in the success of SRSU as an institution that graduates students.

Exercise Eight: "Crystal Ball"

Objectives:

- 1) To set specific goals for our department.
- 2) To create a vision of how we want our department to be perceived on campus.
- 3) To encourage faculty to become better informed about the research and best practices of our field.

Observations:

- 1) We agreed that we want to see the pass rates go up.
Some of the members of the faculty seem to believe that I am arguing for passing students regardless of whether or not they have mastered the skills needed for college level work. The ensuing discussion allowed me to once again reiterate my strongly held commitment to the idea that we cannot in good conscience lower our standards as to student learning outcomes. However, we can change the atmosphere in which that teaching learning takes place.
- 2) We agreed to try to embrace the changes in curriculum and delivery that we are implementing this summer and fall in the hopes that they will result in greater student success.
- 3) We will thoughtfully and reflectively observe the implementation of the curricula changes and the results to determine what modifications need to be made after the fall semester.

There is considerable concern by some faculty members that we are changing the curriculum at the same time that we are changing delivery method for MATH 0300. The concern is that we won't be able to know which change resulted in any changes to the pass/fail rate. I realize that this is not the best experimental design, but then education has always been a difficult field to create traditional cause and effect experiments for. To be honest, if our pass rates go up and we can show that are students are doing well in their first college level class, then I'm willing to acknowledge that we may never be absolutely certain as to which modification led to the change. But we will certainly be able to theorize as to whether or not a particular modification worked or not and work from there.

Closing Activity: Final Walking Tour of the Property

Objective:

- 1) To provide the faculty with a lasting reminder of one of the goals of the QEP: to take advantage of our location to help engage students in learning

Observations:

- 1) Our location was beautiful. Our walk was collegial, friendly, and a wonderful way to end our time together.
- 2) I heard several conversations that were continuations of discussions that we had had earlier during the retreat.

Journal Writing:

Objectives:

- 1) To allow faculty the opportunity to immediately write down their impressions/responses to each activity (or each element of an activity).
- 2) To promote a considered, thoughtful approach to our activities.
- 3) To provide documentation from their perspective of what we did and how they responded to each activity.
- 4) To allow faculty to share their emotional response to the activities without having to do so out loud, but also in a way that would allow them to look back on them later and see if there might be any correlations to how their students feel when placed in similar situations (asked to step outside their comfort zone).
- 5) To encourage faculty to think about the logistics involved in conducting a class outdoors (sunscreen, something to write on, something to carry materials in so the hands are free, etc.)

Observations:

- 1) As with everything, not everybody saw the value of the activity. However, everyone complied and wrote something at each journal session.
- 2) Again, the point of the exercise was to encourage the faculty to consciously consider what we were doing. I didn't want us to be in such a hurry to get through all of the elements of the retreat that we failed to make time for internalization of the consequences/meaning of what we were doing.

Overall Impressions:

- 1) Immediately after the retreat, I felt that we had made some real breakthroughs. In the weeks since we came back to the "real world," I have realized that in some cases I still have some resistance to change. The thinking seems to be along the lines of if I cannot prove that our course modifications will work before the changes are implemented, then we shouldn't be making the changes.
- 2) Every instructor has turned in at least one activity per course that they teach for ACE that they can take outside. Assessment is still the biggest issue, but at least we have activities and a commitment. Copies of the activities are in this report. A binder with the activities will be available to faculty in the ACE Office.
- 3) We did have a good time. We did engage in good discussion. We did confront several areas of concern for the faculty as they relate to what good teaching is. I tried to make the point that no one is arguing that learning will magically take place if we move the location from inside to outside. What we are hoping is that when we turn the outdoors into a classroom, then it can become an integral part of our students' lifelong learning experience. Our hope is that they will ever after view the outdoors as as a learning opportunity.