

THE JOURNEY INTO COMMUNITY:  
THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY IN ONE COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE

By

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DIGESTED FROM A DISSERTATION

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# THE JOURNEY INTO COMMUNITY: DIGESTED FROM A DISSERTATION

## Introduction

American Community Colleges face an uncertain future with increased competition, uncertain funding, and internally- and externally-driven demands that they become ever more responsive to the needs of their stakeholders. Leaders of and writers about community colleges have prescribed various solutions, including recommending that colleges become “learning colleges,” “learning organizations,” and/or “learning communities.” To do so, these colleges may have to make fundamental changes in how people work, including and especially faculty work.

Faculty members in higher education have largely taught in isolation and as “sole proprietors” of their classrooms. This has given them the benefit of independence, a kind of autonomy within their teaching practice that they do not have when they are researchers and part of a community of scholars. It has disadvantaged them, some writers have said, because this isolated practice has meant an existential loneliness among teaching professionals. It has disadvantaged them, their colleges, and their students because it may have reduced the amount of teamwork, collective effort, and mutual conversation that would otherwise help promote the sharing of teaching practice.

In answer to these concerns or in answer to a felt need, some faculty within community colleges have begun the journey into community, which involves faculty increasing the amount of joint efforts in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). This study suggests ways proponents of PLCs may help to promote them in their college. Various individual faculty, group, and leadership behaviors and organizational structures may foster or hinder that development. Elements of academic culture and the college as professional bureaucracy may encourage or hinder this development.

### Definition

A *Professional Learning Community* (PLC) refers to a specific kind of knowledge community or community of practice which has learning or knowledge creation as a goal intimately connected to the organization’s purpose of teaching and learning. Members share individual learning on a regular basis, and create shared learning through their interactions, conversations, and common practice. Learning may be expressed as one primary goal of the community. Whether announced or not, there is a clear focus on learning as a process and a product intended for community members individually and as a group, for the organization as a whole, and for clients of the organization. The new knowledge created here is about teaching and learning in a K-12 school, a college or university, or a training department. As with any community, the members develop a shared history and mutual dependence. In theory, an entire organization could be a PLC; but even within an organization that in its entirety is not one, PLCs may still exist in some variety.

### The Problem and Purpose of this Research

This study has focused on individuals and groups within one Midwestern community college as they described efforts that may have helped them build Professional Learning Communities in their practice. The objective of the study was to assist in understanding how various individual, group, and organizational actions and characteristics may foster or obstruct the development of PLCs in community colleges. The name of the college, its specific location, and the names of participants in this research were disguised to protect confidentiality.

### **Summary of the Methodology Used in this Research**

I began by assuming that PLCs, as I have defined them, did exist within some colleges in some form(s). I chose one Midwestern community college that has publicly espoused a vision of becoming a Learning College and/or Learning Organization in order more effectively to help students learn. The site was selected because it was likely to have teams of faculty working together to improve student learning, and thus contain examples of the PLC.

The overall methodology was the Learning History, a form of organizational ethnography that included the long interview, focus groups, observations by an “outsider,” and document analysis. This study sought to explore how several faculty members at Midwest described their individual and collective journeys to develop Professional Learning Communities. Organization members were asked during long interviews to remember the activities they participated in, to describe current activities, and to reflect on both. Analysis of all data made use of N5 qualitative research software (QSR International) to group findings into categories shaped either by the literature or by a conversation of research with the data.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions were written to explore the development of PLCs at one community college using the experiences, memories, and meaning-making of individual faculty members. Three primary questions guided my research, and the findings:

1. How are the elements of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) as described in the literature exhibited in the following:
  - a. individual faculty member actions and behaviors?
  - b. faculty group and team actions and behaviors?
  - c. administrator and formal leader actions and behaviors?
  - d. academic departments actions and characteristics?
  - e. structures and systems of the larger organization?
  - f. organizational culture?
  - g. organizational community?
2. How may various individual, group, and organizational actions and characteristics be fostering the development of PLCs at Midwest?
3. How may various individual, group, and organizational actions and characteristics be serving as barriers to the development of PLCs at Midwest?

### **Characteristics of PLCs**

The PLCs I observed had the following characteristics:

1. Collaboration in the design of curriculum, classroom tools, and materials
2. Setting of common student learning outcomes and assessment of outcomes
3. Sharing of ideas, techniques, and strategies to improve the classroom
4. Sharing of experiences and informal conversations about teaching and learning over lunch, in hallways, in offices
5. Willingness to openly discuss the effectiveness of college curriculum and teaching as a system across classrooms
6. Willingness to visit each other’s classrooms and/or teach sample sessions before colleagues in “safe” laboratories during professional development workshops
7. Development of a common language to talk about teaching and learning

My observations suggest that members of PLCs exhibit the ability to disagree and to hold such disagreement for long periods without trying to convert each other. These groups exhibited a sense of humor and playfulness, honest and direct conversations, and apparently very positive

relationships, including those between faculty and administrative members. For some faculty in PLCs, teaching practice had changed in some fundamental ways. They felt themselves to be—and I observed that they were—less isolated contractors or sole proprietors and more members of a community working together toward a common goal.

## **General Conclusions**

### **The PLC: Journey into Community**

Teaching as a lonely profession as it generally has been practiced in higher education. Although a teacher is in a room full of students and even if the teacher has fostered a community of learners in that classroom—of which the teacher is a member—, it is still a lonely role. There is a hunger among many (but certainly not all) faculty members for community and for the rich relationships of the PLC. That real hunger will probably bring people together. It is likely that the hunger for community and the hunger for meaning may encourage many faculty to form PLCs.

The PLC is a community and, as such, it is fundamentally relationships and shared culture. Consequently, there has to be a level of trust among its members, a certain knowledge of each other, a certain comfort with each other, a common language on key elements of practice, an agreement on goals and purpose, a reason to come together, and a “living together.” That is, there should be a certain amount of shared experience and common history. Participants in PLCs spoke highly of each other. They were willing to expose their flaws to each other. They had some fun together. They faced some tough challenges together.

The elements of the PLC that I have observed came about not accidentally, but organically. The right people at the right time, or just the right situation, catalyzed the development of PLCs. PLCs may thus develop in isolated spots within a college, or even in a more pervasive way throughout the whole organization. However, PLCs probably will not persist except in these isolated pockets unless the organization becomes intentional in their development, that is, by providing support, making efforts to help them persist, or at least removing barriers to their development.

I am not suggesting that faculty who do not form into a PLC therefore have no relationships with each other. Their relationships are bounded, however, to a purely personal level or to a more formal, professional level. Furthermore, it is not a relationship based on mutual learning about practice. PLCs require a more intense and open relationship because people have to be able to disagree about practice, because it is a mutually challenging and creative relationship, because the community in a PLC is centered on the work, the purpose of the work, the making of the work meaningful.

### **Organizational Change and the PLC at Midwest**

This research has dramatically shown that change in the form of the PLC did not come about through heroic leadership by administrators standing outside the process directing the action as if a military general or a stage director. Instead, the change agents have consistently been faculty, and it was faculty who also did the work of change. Some faculty groups created the impetus and carried the change through with very little administrative support or facilitation. Others quickly grabbed the initiative away from administration and carried it with passion throughout the college. Finally, faculty leaders led the effort to institutionalize the change. In these cases, administrators supported the effort but stayed outside the process of change and did not attempt to control or mandate it. This study suggests that many faculty members are willing and able to do the authentic, hard work of both leading change and of being changed themselves.

This has import for individual faculty. It is easy to work alone in the island classroom, shutting the door to the world’s craziness and the organization’s foibles and faults. It is equally easy

to point fingers at administrators, to deny the validity of a change because it is an “administrative push” or to ignore change led by colleagues because they are from a different discipline or are “trying to be administrators” themselves. As many have shown, there are a hundred reasons to avoid changing. If faculty are passionately committed to their calling, to student learning, this stance will not do. They will gain by leading change or by following those who do. They will gain in at least two ways. First, they will find ways to improve their own practice. Second, they may find that the isolation and loneliness of that island classroom is assuaged.

It is easy to say to administrators that they have an ethical reason to be “servant leaders” and to take their hands off the rudder. We know that administrators are most publicly accountable to Presidents and Boards. Thus, it is hard for many administrators to practice this restraint. This study suggests that not only is the ethical role of servant leader possible, it may be necessary for formal leaders to stand back and trust those doing the work of change if the change is to be fundamental and real.

So much of the literature directed at private sector CEOs and managers, and that directed at college and school administrators as well, describes the role of the administrator to heroically transform the culture, the structure, the very work of the organization. As if a god on a mountaintop, the formal leader directs the motions of the people below. That is not what I discovered in this case. Thus, one role for administrative leaders in this change process was to invite and a second was to support. A third role for administrators was to join in, but as a colleague, shedding their administrative role as much as possible.

Organizational change came about through the accumulation of individual choices. Those individuals choosing, being of and in a social group, influenced each other’s choices. PLCs as they developed at Midwest were the result of those individual choices and mutual influencings, not the result of an administrative mandate, although administrators did provide important supports. As with any community, people joined or chose not to. You cannot coerce a community into being. The power of the leader may be greatest in serving as a catalyst, not in manipulating members into the belief that they were their own change agents and actors, but actually inviting and supporting them as they make their own journey into community. In all truth, they did it themselves.

### **PLCs as Culture Change**

The development of PLCs among faculty is a transformation of culture, as is any significant organizational change. Therefore, you do not get it by writing a plan, reorganizing, reengineering, and so on. Whether it is evolutionary or revolutionary, if it is to be lasting change, deep change, it has to be a change that also transforms the organizational culture. Rewards systems and HR procedures, the organizational structure of committees and departments, all will have an effect on this process of change, certainly. Nonetheless, this is most profoundly a change in faculty and organizational culture. The real power of participation in the PLC comes through meaning-making, through community meaning-making, community purpose, and the deep sharing of practice and meaningful work.

### **Promoting the Development of PLCs**

Those who wish to promote the development of PLCs, be they faculty or administrators, must recognize that success requires a long-term commitment, a long-term view, and long-term patience and persistence. Supporters should avoid becoming angry and impatient if some choose not to volunteer to join in a PLC. These leaders of the development of PLCs should also not assume that they will know in advance or control in any direct way the specific manifestations of PLCs as they develop. Administrators can mandate committee membership, can even try to require or reward team teaching. Faculty can preach by word and model by example. But to become part of a deep

sharing of practice in a community of learners is, as we have said before, voluntary. Below are some strategies for change leaders and individuals who wish to thus promote the development of PLCs.

One powerful barrier to this intentional change is the perception that administrator-led efforts are invasive and undesirable, that all change should be faculty-led and faculty-driven in some kind of pure way. This is an interesting conundrum for administrators. Will the community be suspect? Will PLCs then be painted with the same brush as was used to paint other organizational efforts (e.g., the LC and TQM), that is, as an administrative push, a fad, or the flavor of the month? Will this in turn discourage faculty from participating?

Administrators may openly state their beliefs that PLCs among faculty are helpful, useful, healthy, and meaningful. They can say that they want to work with faculty to help foster PLCs, with the understanding that it is a voluntary choice to join one. As long as faculty are showing up, teaching students, doing their work well, administrators will not punish anyone who chooses not to join in a PLC. Administrators can formally and informally communicate and celebrate successful PLCs. Even so, some faculty will choose to condemn the PLC as an administrative push or intrusion and reject it out of hand. While those who wish to promote PLCs can recognize this and make every effort to avoid it, in the end, they cannot prevent an individual faculty member from choosing to make this negative meaning of PLCs. Leaders do not stop doing what is right because some will react against it. In terms of making the college more of a Learning Organization, in terms of changing the organization, this effort is worthwhile, and it seems likely to produce PLCs in various loci throughout the college.

If those who wish to promote PLCs do all of these things, does it guarantee that PLCs will develop? There is no such thing as a guarantee. However, if leaders have faith in the PLC as a positive development, stick with it, and are true to its principles, then it is likely that PLCs will evolve over time.

### **Part-time Faculty and the PLC**

The role of part-time adjunct faculty is problematic for developing PLCs. Given that a significant portion of classes are taught by part-time faculty in community colleges across the nation, this has a profound impact on any collective effort to benefit student learning. Part-time faculty often teach at more than one college to make ends meet, or they have a separate daytime career that takes up most of their time, energy, and commitment. They have less time on campus, seldom have office space, often teach at night when most of the full-time faculty are gone, and generally have less connection with the campus, with students, and with full-time and even adjunct colleagues. Sometimes they have a lower level of commitment to teaching, or less expertise or experience. Often they have little time to go to department meetings, take advantage of professional development workshops, or engage in informal contacts, all of which may promote the development of PLCs. The college that wants to develop the PLC in all of its richness will have to face the challenge of involving part-time faculty in that opportunity. One hopeful point, as indicated in this research, the solitariness of part-time faculty may sometimes breed a hunger for community, which may make them less defensive and more willing to share practice.

### **The Learning College and the PLC**

One overriding debate at Midwest had to do with the effects and effectiveness of official efforts to become a Learning College, adopted by the college as part of a formal vision statement, and thus an official organization development effort. Most of the faculty I spoke with described the Learning College as just another administrative “fad,” “flavor of the month,” or “buzzword,” having little real significance in their work. Certainly, we could explain this as part of the common contention between faculty and administration, based in part on differing subcultural assumptions

about how the world works and the organization's place within that world. We can explain it as well as that common antipathy between labor and management, existing even in a highly professionalized organization like the professional bureaucracy. To some extent, this may even be healthy. I believe there is more to it than that.

It was remarkable how much harmony I heard between what the official vision was and what the individuals and groups of faculty I spoke with and observed said and did. Even as they sometimes laughed at the language of the Learning College, to a person they espoused principles and described actions and behaviors that were in harmony with the principles of the Learning College. They may have explained this all away by saying that the Learning College was nothing new, "old wine in new bottles," and so forth. They also made it clear that they had been doing this all along and that they did not believe they had changed their commitment to student learning as a result of this administrative initiative. All the same, the Learning College initiative may foster change even if individual faculty members are skeptical of its faddish aspects and jargon.

We cannot tell if the Learning College concepts have influenced significant change at Midwest and in its faculty, or if those concepts merely describe what already had come into existence there. The reality may be a little of both. Given the history and memory of participants, a learning-centered approach and a culture of assessment seemed to have existed at Midwest to some degree prior to any of the literature defining or describing them. At least among the faculty I talked with, these concepts were not controversial, but instead generally accepted. Certainly, many were skeptical of the administrative use of the "jargon" of the Learning College, and also of a complacency that could arise from believing that Midwest was "already there."

Nonetheless, the language of the Learning College helped initiate conversations and debates at Midwest. In turn, these debates may continue to foster a college-wide dialogue, which may foster the development of PLCs, even when individuals do not "believe" in the Learning College as such. A sense of common purpose may promote the sense of community, even while the debate over means proceeds. When there is a commonly accepted sense of service to students and colleagues, faculty may "join" the Learning College and/or participate in a PLC with their behaviors if not their words. The effect of a consistent message may pervade the college, if the message is continued for longer than a few years, especially if organizational systems, grants, and budgets are designed to promote and support the message and the concept of the Learning College. Otherwise, the impression of the "flavor of the month" will be reinforced.

Under the right circumstances, the Learning College and the PLC may be mutually reinforcing. One result of a learning-centered focus in language and vision may be an increase in the sense that all members of the college are part of a community of learners. In this way, the Learning College may promote the development of PLCs. And if faculty are encouraged to see themselves as learners because of participation in a PLC, then the latter may have a profound effect in encouraging a more learning-centered campus.

### **Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Practitioners**

The answers I infer here are evidenced by a small number of participants in one community college. Therefore, my answers have some validity only within that limited context. No generalizability is implied and applicability is left to the practitioner in his or her own local context. Nonetheless, what can we say about these rich findings, however local the context? I divide my recommendations into three parts: general recommendations of interest to all practitioners, recommendations for individual faculty members, recommendations for faculty chairs and leaders, and recommendations for administrative leaders wishing to promote PLCs.

## General Recommendations

This section will discuss recommendations that individual faculty members, groups, teams and departments, department chairs, administrators, and professional development staff may find useful should they wish more intentionally to promote PLCs.

### Hiring and Mentoring Practices

**Recommendation: When the opportunity arises to hire new faculty, search team members, leaders, and evaluation committees may want to look for and reward those personal characteristics that suggest a candidate is inclined to participate in a PLC.** With roughly half of all faculty members in higher education nearing retirement, there are more opportunities for wholesale turnover than there will be again for a generation. Search teams may hire for these characteristics and change job postings accordingly. These characteristics may include the following:

- A love for and dedication to teaching and helping students learn above the desire to do research or other parts of the job, expressed through actions and words that suggest love and passion;
- A personal mission and desire to give back, which may make the candidate more likely to still the ego and reach out to colleagues in order to manifest the mission;
- For those being hired at Midwest and other community colleges, a commitment to the mission of the community college and its focus on teaching;
- Personal experiences as a student which have led the candidate to be dissatisfied with one or two teaching methods and desirous of learning new techniques in order to help a diverse body of students succeed;
- Experiences as a teacher which catalyze this previous experience as a student into the desire to continuously improve as a teacher;
- Training and/or experience in teaching in the K-12 system or as a professional development trainer over and above mastery of the content, so that there may be a predilection to sharing practice and understanding of learning and teaching theory;
- Words and experiences which suggest a dissatisfaction with traditional teaching methods and thus a familiarity with and willingness to explore alternatives with colleagues, and the expression of a fear of being outdated, and thus a willingness to keep seeking;
- A desire to avoid the solitariness of the profession and instead to reach out regularly to colleagues;
- A recognition of the changing student body, of the changing role of the teacher, and thus a willingness to keep advancing themselves;
- Previous and positive experiences with teams, team teaching, and other collaborative efforts;
- A more global sense of the role of the individual teacher, evidenced perhaps by leadership or other experience on cross-functional and cross-disciplinary teams;
- Evidence of volunteerism, the willing and eager participation in activities and programs beyond the role of classroom teacher as narrowly defined, including and perhaps especially previous experience with reciprocal classroom visits;
- If at all possible, evidence of being a champion of shared practice and participation in a learning community.

**Recommendation: Well-designed mentoring programs may be critical in fostering the PLC among newly hired faculty, even and especially those with previous teaching experience.** Beyond the close connection between a more senior and a new faculty member, a mentoring program that promotes collaboration with many colleagues, both within and perhaps beyond the specific academic department, may encourage a new teacher to share practice over the whole career. Reciprocal classroom visits and ongoing conversations about practice may enrich the teaching lives of the more senior faculty as well as the newly hired. It may be that beginning a teaching career at a college with this kind of close community is more likely to promote the continuance of PLCs despite the distractions of a busy career.

### **Joint and Collaborative Activities**

**Recommendation: Colleges may want to support such professional development activities as the Process Education™ program (Pacific Crest) and the Teaching Effectiveness program,** whether as part of a system-wide professional and organizational development program, or as a grassroots initiative. Key to fostering the development of PLCs may be the collaborative sharing of practice and experience in a relatively safe laboratory setting, followed by some semi-structured follow-up whereby colleagues continue to share practice and talk about teaching as they visit each other's classrooms.

**Recommendation: Those who wish to promote PLCs may want to take advantage of complaints about the failure of students to achieve certain learning outcomes as a way to encourage conversation and perhaps the joint ownership of the problem.** As we have seen, facing a common challenge or problem may be the “cauldron” (Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, & Kleiner, 1994) that can make or break community. It may be that a common problem and a common responsibility for its solution foster community where “the blame game” discourages it. Driven by recognition that they share the responsibility for curriculum, defining student outcomes, and for student learning, faculty may move towards the PLC. Not everyone who complains, of course, will want to step forward to take some ownership; but as long as some do, that may be enough to get started towards the PLC, and the view of teaching as “community property” (Schulman, 1993).

**Recommendation: Colleges may want to promote cross-disciplinary solutions to problems and foster cross-disciplinary conversations about student learning, as a way of encouraging both a sense of joint responsibility and the development of PLCs.** Gathering faculty frustration over student learning outcomes and directing it as a positive force for change may be a powerful organizational development strategy. Such initiatives as writing across the curriculum, student outcomes assessment, and general education redesign may be ways of starting these conversations around legitimate problems.

**Recommendation: Time has to be made for important joint activities such as off-campus retreats, professional development workshops, and collaborative curriculum design,** because busy faculty schedules require that individuals teach at many different times and locations. It may also be that getting away from campus together breaks the patterns of normal interrelationship and allows for more openness to change. Departments, teams, and committees may wish to make annual traditions out of planning retreats. The college should support and actively encourage these off-campus retreats and joint experiences.

## New Technologies

**Recommendation: Learning new teaching technologies such as web design, multimedia production, various forms of distance learning technology, and the development of computer-assisted learning may encourage the development of PLCs among faculty.**

Senior faculty members may take umbrage at anyone suggesting they do not already have the expertise to teach their content, and thus turn away from the aspects of the PLC that call for exposing one's "weaknesses." However, no one expects faculty members to be experts in the use of new media and technology when they were hired, unless that hiring was relatively recent. Those who willingly collaborate may not need the excuse, and will love the opportunity to work together. Others, who do need a safe and supportive place to surrender—even temporarily—the role of "sage on the stage," may discover in technology the excuse or impetus to join a PLC. Paradoxically, even the failures of technology and technical support may promote collaboration and the PLC.

## Organizational Structures and Systems

**Recommendation: Wherever possible, colleges may want to create departments with members who have some commonality of academic discipline, background, and/or experience.** When that is not possible, departments may need to take extra effort to foster community among members through both on-task activities such as projects and interdisciplinary efforts, and on-team efforts such as social events and team-building activities. Creating community from great diversity remains a challenge for our world, let alone our organizations. Perhaps a commonality of commitment to and experience within teaching practice may help here, but my study did not focus in that direction.

**Recommendation: Colleges may want to add or revise the criteria for tenure, merit pay, promotion, and evaluation so as to recognize and reward activities and projects in support of development of PLCs.** These may include team teaching, mentoring, reciprocal classroom visits (peer coaching) and other collaborative activities mentioned herein. Midwest, in particular, may want to incorporate these into the current agreement over working conditions and wages and benefits, or a new bargaining agreement should the faculty succeed in unionizing. Along similar lines, if Midwest wishes to promote team teaching, it will have to revise its method of paying faculty rather than discourage this practice.

## Organizational Change Initiatives

**Recommendation: Rather than developing an official intervention to promote the development of PLCs, colleges may want to provide philosophical and resource support for faculty as learners collaboratively seeking ways to improve student learning.** If the college actively promotes the PLC, it may be perceived as yet another "fad" or "buzzword" in the minds of many faculty members. If the PLC were presented as a descriptive set of characteristics with possible strategies for its development, not as a mandatory program, some faculty members may choose to view it less negatively. Especially if faculty members themselves take the impetus and leadership, asking for the support to work together in PLCs of their own making, the skepticism may be less.

**Recommendation: Midwest may want to continue (and other colleges to sponsor) the public dialogue about the college as a Learning College, perhaps expanding the discussion to include how working in a PLC helps in that journey.** Midwest may want to hold public visioning sessions on what the Learning College means and what comes next. As Senge (1990)

advocated, when an organizational community develops that vision together, there is greater ownership and advocacy across the organization. Celebrating those faculty who work in a PLC may further enhance the vision of the college as “learners all.”

**Recommendation:** **Many others before me have recommended that organizations stick to a theme, a message, a method, and an initiative for a long while.** At Midwest, they have heard assessment, strategic planning, TQM, and the Learning College trumpeted by a changing guard of administrators. Leaders, both formal and informal, may want to describe the connections among those seemingly discrete programs, showing the historical context of each separately and together, and making clear how all are still present in organizational systems and processes. Saying is important, but doing more so. The current strategic plan, web site, Learning College Grants and other programs have clear connections with the Learning College and its six descriptors. These connections too should be made manifest and regularly explained. If Midwest wishes the Learning College, the PLC, and associated initiatives to “stick,” then they should sing the same song together for a number of years.

### **Budget and Resources**

**Recommendation:** **Midwest should continue (and other colleges to create) the Learning College Grants, and especially the criterion requiring collaborative teams.** To promote more consciously the development of PLCs, those projects and strategic initiatives that may foster elements of the PLC as described in this study may be given funding preference. Perhaps most important, the use of grants to promote shared responsibility, innovation, collaboration, and cross-disciplinary experimentation surfaced as a powerful tool in promoting PLCs. Clearly, Midwest should continue these supports.

**Recommendation:** **Midwest should continue support in the strategic plan, the college budget, and the infrastructure for collaborative professional development experiences among faculty.** Professional development activities, especially the Process Education™ workshops, seem to have been a critical catalyst for developing PLCs. It is doubtful that the Process Education™ program would have had the impact that it had if it had been short-lived. It became a permanent part of the college through being given a prominent place in the college budget and strategic plan. In turn, this initiative fostered elements of the PLC such as shared practice, conversations about teaching and learning, and reciprocal classroom visits or the equivalent in sample teaching before peers.

**Recommendation:** **Colleges should provide release time as well as formal and informal spaces in the workweek for faculty to collaborate, mentor, and develop themselves and their colleagues.** Time, the only nonrenewable resource, can be used to support many of the activities we have discussed above.

### **Organizational Culture**

**Recommendation:** **Those who wish to promote PLCs should capitalize on such faculty values as the preference for “faculty-led” and “faculty-driven” initiatives over “administrative pushes.”** The PLC is at essence a local production. At least among the faculty who think more globally and see their responsibility for student learning as extending beyond their individual classrooms, there may be more willingness to work in community and to share practice as long as these efforts are faculty-led. Correspondingly, it may also be that working in community encourages that belief in the shared responsibility for student learning.

## External Environment

**Recommendation: Colleges may want to use external forces as a rationale for and an opportunity to foster shared conversations among faculty, staff and administrators.** Colleges have little control and only some influence over the environmental factors that may promote or inhibit the development of PLCs. Changes in students, accreditation criteria, policies enacted by the Board of Regents, and demands for accountability from external stakeholders will likely only increase throughout the nation. How should colleges respond? What impacts on student learning and on teaching are likely to result? How can we act together to meet this threat or opportunity? These kinds of questions may foster a shared sense of responsibility for student learning and for organizational success, and thus promote the development of PLCs.

### **Recommendations for Faculty**

Next, we review implications for teaching faculty who wish to join, support, or promote PLCs in their practice with their colleagues.

**Recommendation to Faculty: Individual faculty members who wish to promote PLCs may choose to develop some of the personal characteristics and take some of the individual actions mentioned above (see page 8), and to associate themselves with those who do likewise.**

**Recommendation to Faculty: Those who seek to promote real change may want to find productive ways of aligning together with administrators in ways which benefit the college, moving the college towards an organization as PLC.** Regardless of generation, individual faculty members may want to ask themselves, “Do I stick with my anti-administrative stance even if I want to foster fundamental change in my own and others practice? Do we turn away from something only because administration supports it?”

**Recommendation to Faculty: Individual faculty members may choose to surrender some of their individual prerogatives to work within a PLC to reduce their professional isolation and loneliness.** Joining an organization means enrolling in a common venture, being subject to some social controls and group decisions, and thus giving away some individual choice, at least while at the workplace. Teaching faculty in higher education have largely been free agents, and have felt very little of this loss of individual choice. The island classroom has certain benefits for those whom individual prerogative is as or even more valuable than connection with colleagues in community. But it also results in an existential loneliness of practice, a loneliness that may be assuaged by working within a PLC.

**Recommendation to Faculty: Individual faculty may wish to join with colleagues in accepting collective responsibility for teaching, and that part of the student learning process under their influence.** Faculty will feel increasing pressure from internal and external stakeholders to be accountable for student learning. This is not effective or fair accountability when it focuses solely on the individual instructor, whether through student or administrative evaluation, or classroom assessment techniques. Systems thinking and our real experience as students and teachers tells us that this accountability is a rich and complex one, involving all the faculty who touch a given student plus all of the organizational support systems. The PLC may be a richer and more satisfying way of accepting collective responsibility for teaching and student learning than by being subject to external testing and administrative oversight, both of which may come if we cannot demonstrate collective ownership of the teaching of our students.

**Recommendation to Faculty: Involvement in an active PLC may be used to help reduce burnout and career fatigue.** Without some pause for reflective practice, the daily responsibilities of

teaching and managing both the classroom and the larger faculty role may lead to burnout or reduced career satisfaction as the years pass. Faculty may wish to manage their careers and daily work in such a way as to schedule time and opportunities to work with colleagues within a PLC. These could include formal and informal activities. Formal activities include cross-functional teams and curriculum development, professional development programs that encourage peer-to-peer sharing, serving as a mentor, and teaching circles. Informal activities include inviting colleagues into reciprocal classroom visits, conversations about practice, sharing materials and classroom strategies, and asking colleagues to review and critique classroom materials and activities. As a further benefit, being in the student role again, as Pamela Jagiello suggests in the above quotation, may reinforce an increased sensitivity to what our students face every day. It may be that belonging to a PLC enriches the faculty career in ways that make the risks worth taking.

### **Recommendations for Chairs and Faculty Leaders**

**Recommendation: Chairs/Faculty leaders should promote and foster the development of PLCs both by serving as role models and by actions they may take in their role as leader.**

At Midwest, as is true at many colleges and universities, department chairs are faculty positions with quasi-administrative powers and responsibilities. They can be the lynch pin in many faculty change initiatives. By visiting classes and encouraging colleagues to reciprocate, by supporting the development of the group as a PLC both emotionally and with department resources, and by encouraging teamwork in the department and collaborative efforts and projects, these leaders may foster the development of PLCs. Chairs also help by giving power and responsibility to department colleagues and by protecting them, when appropriate, from external forces and administrative actions that might hamper their work and development.

**Recommendation: Faculty members may also choose periodically to take on a leadership role that helps give them a more global perspective.** Such roles also bring faculty into contact with colleagues from across the college and promote collaboration. Leadership development programs may be designed, in part, to help candidates learn the skills and behaviors that support participation in a PLC.

### **Recommendations for Administrators**

#### **Support for the Faculty making the Change**

**Recommendation to Administrators: Administrators, individually and collectively, should provide support for faculty risk-taking and clear parameters for the kinds of initiatives that they will regard as positive risks.** Support for risk-taking may be logistical, verbal, and/or symbolic. This may entail protecting nascent efforts like the PLC from the “immune system” of the organization for several years until those efforts become part of the “way we do things.”

**Recommendation to Administrators: Administrators should provide time and space for PLCs to develop, recognizing this an investment in longer-term success.** They can support faculty as they experiment, celebrating victories and not punishing “failures.” Faculty must take time away from their role as teacher to be learners themselves in community. Administrators can be patient with this slow investment.

#### **Support for the PLC**

**Recommendation to Administrators: Administrators can continue to encourage participation in activities that promote collaboration and the development of PLCs, and in other ways provide public and private support.** Ironically, this very support can poison a new

effort if it seems to many faculty members that the whole thing is nothing but an “administrative push.” Administrators cannot allow this to paralyze them. It is best if they work in response to faculty-initiated and faculty-led efforts, and that they are seen as supporting what many faculty want and need. Probably regular communication, which for those in power means much listening, combined with the willingness to stay in the background and let others take the full credit, will help ameliorate the worst of this negative effect of their support. It will take great organizational skills to know when the reaction from a few faculty is a symptom of real concern and a sign that the administrator should back off and work with and through others, and when this is a sign of the very effectiveness of the initiative and nothing more than the regular complaints of a few outliers.

Recommendation to Administrators: **Administrators can use budgeting and planning to foster the development of PLCs.** Many participants have mentioned funding as an important way by which administrators can publicly signal their backing and provide real support for initiatives that promote PLCs. Budgets can directly fund activities and indirectly allow for them by supplying the necessary infrastructure and supporting release time for faculty to do other work. In this study, we have seen how administrators at Midwest provided release time and other opportunities for faculty to work on key initiatives in support of PLCs.

### Vision and Direction

Recommendation to Administrators: **Administrators and other leaders should attempt to provide consistency and continuity of direction and support over time and through leadership succession.** It may be tempting for the new administrators to “make their mark” by starting new initiatives. However, support for ongoing successful efforts should be clear and steady, otherwise feeding the notion that all organization development programs are “flavors of the month.” It takes many years for organizations to change. Turnover of administrators is common. If that turnover leads to an overturning of all the work that has come before, most likely there is organizational churn, not change.

Recommendation to Administrators: **Administrators can show the long historical development of the Learning College and PLC, providing a long-term context and helping people make connections between various organization development programs.** Barr and Tagg (1995), in their article, “From Teaching to Learning—A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education,” which in some ways began the discourse on the Learning College, wrote that the shift to a learning focus from a focus on teaching was more about transforming organizational systems and structures than it was about convincing faculty. Administrators can demonstrate a focus on transforming these larger systems in aid of the faculty work.

### Modeling the Role

Recommendation to Administrators: **To be effective, leaders should “walk the talk” and be true to their espoused principles.** Subordinates watch leaders very carefully, and are harsh critics of what appears to be hypocritical behaviors. In the professional bureaucracy, those administrators who have “come up through the ranks” as teachers have a higher credibility. Obviously, an administrator who does not have a teaching background cannot get one overnight. Teaching a few classes at the home institution or for another nearby may help. Maybe most importantly, if an administrator wants to promote PLCs, then she or he should model that participation, serving on cross-functional teams such as the Trailblazers at Midwest, or in PLCs of administrators.

Recommendation to Administrators: **To promote the development of PLCs, administrators should exhibit the best traits of real community:** genuine human concern for colleagues, listening deeply with eye (body language) as well as the ear (reflective listening); withholding judgments in dialogue while not ignoring or denying real conflict; not trying to fix or “heal” people while supervising behaviors; de-emphasizing command and control in favor of other forms of leadership. Above all, being a facilitator in the background while giving public credit to others often builds a sense of respect and trust. Modeling what is expected and desired may be the administrator’s most powerful tool.

Recommendation to Administrators: **Sometimes the primary role of administration is to do no harm, to not get in the way.** That is a more modest and humble role, but critical if the college is to be a true community of responsible adults, not of children. There is formal power in the role of administrator, certainly. Nevertheless, it is the informal power of influence and of service that makes the role at once a more humble and a richer one. Or, to paraphrase *Tao te Ching*, when the work of the leader is done, the people say, “We did it ourselves.”

## Conclusion

The journey into community is like any journey. The faculty member who makes the journey takes risks, loses some individual prerogative and freedom, and pays a price of time and effort. The community college that invests in the development of PLCs loses some short-term faculty productivity as measured in time in the classroom, has to expend limited institutional resources, may have to alter leadership philosophies and practice. What do they each gain? This study has been an illustration of one local answer to that question. One participant may have summarized it well for the individual:

While I really love teaching, what keeps me here and positive and being willing to put up with everything else is the fact that I work with a great team! And I think I would be hard pressed to find a team anywhere else in the United States of America that is as wonderful as this team of people is. And they bring so much to me because they see my potential before I see it. They support me. They’ll show me direction, and yet they’ll also tell me when I’m being an idiot. And there’s not too many places where you can find that kind of mix. So I’m very fortunate. Wouldn’t trade it. Wouldn’t trade it.

If many faculty members felt this way because of belonging to a PLC, the college would gain what management can never mandate: A thriving culture of experimentation and sharing of practice, an invigorated and self-renewing culture, a body of faculty energized and challenged by each other, and a richer learning environment for everyone including and especially the students. The journey may be worth it.

As with any human invention, every manifestation of the PLC would most likely be unique to that group of people playing it out. Given the voluntary nature of membership in a PLC as discussed above, every PLC would likely be individual in its manifestation and uncontrollable by any mandate or directive. Administrators and faculty seeking to foster the development of PLCs may certainly influence the likelihood of those manifestations, and may certainly support them in ways we have outlined in this study.

Any attempt to force every PLC to fit one narrowed conception would likely be counterproductive. Using some of the suggestions above, administrators and faculty proponents may be able to cast the seeds of the PLC in the garden of the college. Some seeds will germinate, some will wither, and some will remain dormant below the surface. All that grow will likely continue to be unique to that group of faculty in that particular circumstance. If each helps its members find a way into community and improves teaching and learning, we should not care what particular flower has bloomed.

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