

SoTL Fellows at Northern Essex Community College

By: Judith Kamber, Dean of Professional Development

To build on the work of our first Communities of Practice: Pooling Educational Resources (COPPER) cluster, NECC launched its first SoTL group in the spring of 2004. The Teaching & Learning Center, in collaboration with Academic Affairs, provided faculty an opportunity to begin their SoTL work.

At NECC, we created a community of practice for faculty who wished to explore teaching and learning and study their craft in a collaborative environment of colleagues. In the community college, faculty members are committed to teaching, but due to large course loads have little time for the reflective practice and scholarly research that sustains and energizes teaching and learning. In addition, rarely do faculty members have the opportunity to benefit from peer review which can often seem burdensome instead of beneficial. At NECC, SoTL fellows were given two course adjustments so they could fully pursue their SoTL work. They found this to truly support the seriousness of the college in respect to their SoTL work.

Faculty at NECC found the deliberate process of studying and researching student learning, opening this work to critical review and sharing ideas set the stage for more thoughtful approaches to teaching and learning. The focus on assessment central to SoTL helped faculty appreciate assessment as part of a thoughtful inquiry into student learning.

Our first project supported eight, full-time faculty who came together for three semesters and shared their work through discussion, common readings, the development of scholarly research and the refinement of individual project goals.

We learned a great deal from our first experience with a SoTL group and we incorporated a number of presentations for our second 2006 SoTL group. These presentations included a meeting with one of our librarians who provided detailed information about library research tools and how to access research, articles and books related to the participant's interests. We also invited our Director of Outcomes and Program Assessment, who has a Ph.D. in research, to meet with the participants to provide an overview of research methodology. She also was available as a consultant to each participant. We invited past SoTL participants to one of our meetings so that faculty could have the opportunity to hear about what they had learned about their work and ask questions. Finally each participant selected a partner for peer review.

Our last SoTL group (2008-2009) consisted of seven faculty. We provided each participant with the book *What Works: A Practical Guide for Teacher Research* and access to articles and books on SoTL. This group was distinguished from past groups by the fact that each was asked to design their proposals around our institutional "Achieving the Dream" initiative. Each of our SoTL groups has benefited from the work of the COPPER Cluster and Carnegie as well.

Overall, SoTL at NECC has clearly contributed to our knowledge of classroom pedagogy, created a new appreciation for scholarly research and has had a very positive affect on the culture of teaching and learning on campus. SoTL at NECC is recognized and valued by the President and the Vice President of Academic Affairs and with the new direction of aligning SoTL with Achieving the Dream, I expect SoTL to become a fundamental part of our college and our commitment to student learning.

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