

Creating a Faculty Development Center at the RIT American University in Kosovo

Final Report

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What follows is a preliminary report following my visit to RIT Kosovo (A.U.K.), Thursday, October 22nd and Friday, October 23rd, 2015. I look forward to working with the faculty and staff of the University, to finalize a plan for launching the new Faculty Development Center and to support the campus as its initial programs are developed and rolled out.

1. Initial data gathering

Prior to my visit to the campus, I gathered information about RIT Kosovo A.U.K. and its various constituents from several sources.

- I visited the *RIT Kosovo (A.U.K.)*, and *RIT websites*, and gleaned much information about the university, its faculty, its resources, and the programs it offers.
- I was able to review two internal documents provided to me – the *RIT/A.U.K. Faculty Policy Handbook* (dated May 15, 2015) and the *RIT/A.U.K. Impressum* (dated September 14, 2015).
- And finally, I was able to get a sense of the priorities of faculty members themselves, through anonymous responses from approximately one-third of the faculty to a needs-assessment survey I constructed and administered on-line.

During the *first day of my visit*, I was able to tour the facilities, and see the spaces where faculty development programs and services might be integrated into campus operations. I met with *a number of faculty members*, formally, as a large group, individually, and informally, over dinner. I also met with several key staff members, including:

- *Ivana Stevanovic (Librarian)*,
- *Rezarta Xhaferi (head of Media Center)*,
- *Leonard Camaj (IT Helpdesk Administrator)*,
- *Daniel Cosentino (Vice President for Academic Affairs)*
- *and Ilirjana Ademaj (Head of Academic Support Center)*.

And finally, I met with members of the *Academic Senate*, to share ideas about the role a Faculty Development Center might play in supporting faculty in their work in general, and in focusing professional development efforts to best align with the full complement of performance expectations outlined in faculty contracts and evaluation processes.

During the *second day of my visit*, I conducted a series of four faculty development sessions focused on (1) teaching and learning (*Right out of the Gate: Tools and Tips for Creating a Respectful and Caring Teaching and Learning Community*), (2) research (*Advancing your Research and Scholarship and Creative Activity*), (3) collegial collaboration (*Creating Opportunities for Collegial Conversation*), and (4) integrating instructional technology (*Leveraging Communication Technologies*). *These sessions served a dual purpose*. On the one hand, they were intended as “mini” faculty development demonstration sessions, where I could share techniques and tools that might enrich the professional repertoire of the participants. But significantly, these sessions also provided me with a sense of the kinds of enrichment and professional development opportunities the faculty at RIT Kosovo (A.U.K.) might find most useful and appealing.

Thus, I was able to develop a fairly good understanding of

- the depth and breadth of the professional expertise and resources available to faculty, both locally and through RIT; and
- the range of strengths and needs and wishes of the faculty.

2. Impressions

Given the size and relative youth of the University as well as its relatively modest operating budget, *there are remarkably sophisticated and cutting-edge resources available to support its educational mission*. For example,

- Ivana Stevanovic (Librarian) reported that members of the university community (including faculty, staff and students) have access to over 200 databases, and to the full complement of resources of RIT as well as the [AMICAL](#) international library consortium. She herself has significant expertise and professional connections, and she is clearly very interested in collaborating with faculty more broadly and creatively in both curriculum and research-related endeavors.
- Rezarta Xhaferi (head of the Media Center) described state-of-the-art multi-media projects she was able to assist students in creating, for their capstone assignments, and she described a series of eLearning modules she assisted faculty to create and integrate into the curriculum of their courses. Her expertise and her passion for her work were evident as we contemplated ways she might “reach” more of the faculty.
- And Leonard Camaj (IT Helpdesk Administrator) enumerated a large set of technological tools and software programs that faculty can access in support of their work, including state-of-the-art telepresence resources (e.g., Cisco, BlueJeans), recording, editing and archiving programs (e.g., Camtasia), and data analysis software (e.g., Minitab). He too expressed a strong wish to connect more effectively with the faculty, to work with them to explore and understand and make use of the range of technology tools at their fingertips.

Whatever programs and services the new Center plans to offer, my sense is that appropriate physical resources and space are available.

- The office space proposed for the Center appears to be well-suited to the likely demands, as it is in close proximity to the Media Center, the IT office and the library. While it is too small to accommodate center-sponsored activities that bring more than 3-4 people together at once, there are other perfectly suitable venues within easy reach.
- The multi-purpose/conference room (401) can be configured to accommodate a range of activities.
- The individual work-spaces in the expanded library and the areas adjacent to the Instructional Technology and Media Center offices are well-suited to individual and collaborative faculty development projects.
- The collaborative spaces, including the communal area outside of the faculty offices and in the cafeteria are well-suited to informal conversation and group work.
- And last but not least, the proximity of the campus to Germia Park, with its beautiful open spaces and walking trails, presents opportunities for more “out-of-the-box” retreats and spontaneous conversations.

Perhaps the most important “asset” is the commitment and enthusiasm exhibited by the faculty and staff themselves, for their work, for their students, for the University and its mission, and for the possibilities of learning together and from each other.

Two specific instances where this set of fortuitous dispositional characteristics manifested itself transpired during the first “training session” on Friday morning.

- One occurred in response to a warm-up prompt I posed at the opening of the session, asking faculty to think-pair-share about a teacher they remembered fondly and what they had found so memorable about that person. Every participant in the session immediately became engaged and animated, and the conversation that ensued reflected how well participants were poised to listen and respond to one another with a good mix of humor and thoughtfulness. It was a hopeful sign that faculty members were so willing to “jump in” and talk.
- The second occurred in response to an exercise I asked participants to engage in, as a way of illustrating issues that can arise when students are required to perform tasks which they may feel exceed their levels of competence or which makes them feel uncomfortable in some way. Each faculty member was given a blank piece of paper. They were asked to work in pairs, to “draw a bunny rabbit” and to then “provide constructive criticism of your partner’s bunny rabbit, commenting on something they had done well and something they might have done better.” As it turned out, very few of the faculty knew what a bunny rabbit looked like – a problem resulting from my own cultural short-sightedness. Undaunted, however, several faculty members immediately took out their smart phones, and located and shared YouTube video segments demonstrating how to draw a rabbit.

Several things were noteworthy here. First, I was struck by the quick problem-solving ability of the faculty in the face of the dilemma I had inadvertently created for them. Second, I was struck by the collaborative spirit, as faculty members shared with one another the link they had located. And third, I was impressed by the spontaneous conversation that ensued, as faculty immediately turned to discussing how this exercise might be used in their classes, to nurture in their students academic resilience and problem-solving strategies.

Several more general examples of this positive disposition occurred later in the morning, as we discussed different models of collegial collaboration, and participants spontaneously suggested formats and topics that would be both interesting and professionally enriching. I develop some of the strands that emerged from these comments below, as they make excellent starting-points for recommendations for follow-up activities.

3. Recommendations

Staffing and leadership.

I would recommend that, organizationally, the Faculty Development Center be housed under the wing of the VPAA's office.

I would recommend that *resources be allocated to permit Mimoza Polloshka to be released from some portion of her teaching obligations, so that she can assume leadership of the Faculty Development Center as it officially launches.* It is my understanding that she has worked closely with the RIT Kosovo (A.U.K.) administration to secure funding for the initial stages of its design, and she has clearly studied different models of university professional development offices. She has the sincere respect and backing of the entire RIT Kosovo (A.U.K.) community in this effort. She has an excellent working relationship with all of the relevant constituents.

The Center director may want to compose an Advisory Board comprised of a subset of RIT Kosovo (A.U.K.), faculty and staff, or make use of the Academic Senate as an advisory body.

Programming and Center activities.

There was significant resonance to the notion of a Center that could provide support for faculty as they explore ways to enrich their teaching and as they develop research and scholarly agendas, however modest or ambitious. There was significant curiosity about the "worlds" of information literacy and technology and enthusiasm that the RIT Kosovo (A.U.K.) staff might help faculty navigate these as yet relatively unexplored realms. And there was distinct enthusiasm for the prospect of working together and developing collegial collaborations. In consideration of all of the above and of the suggestions and requests voiced by

faculty and staff throughout my visit, I recommend the following as initial Center “offerings”:

1) Lunch-time “collegial conversations” as the structure to bring faculty and staff together, for hour-long sessions. Each session would begin with an informational presentation or demonstration, and then move to more informal discussion as participants contemplated how the presentation might apply to their own work or interests. *Lunch-and-learn sessions might be scheduled monthly or semi-monthly, depending on the level of interest.* Initial topics might include:

- a presentation by the Librarian and a faculty member or two with whom she has worked, to describe activities they developed together to enrich a particular course;
- a presentation by the Media Center director and a faculty member or two with whom she has worked to develop eLearning or multi-media course assignments
- a presentation by the IT staff and a faculty member or two with whom they have worked, to develop technology-enhanced course components or opportunities for professional collaborations with colleagues at other sites.

Future sessions might consist of somewhat informal presentations by a faculty member or two about their scholarship, the goal being to create an opportunity to explore possible collaborative and/or cross-disciplinary efforts.

2) Friday “professional development session mornings” as the structure to bring faculty together to engage in more in-depth hands-on training or exploration of issues. Sessions might be scheduled monthly or twice a semester, depending on the level of interest. They might evolve as follow-on the lunch-time discussions. Topics might include demonstrations and support for exploring some of the multi-media resources, the instructional technology and communication tools and the library resources. Topics might also include in depth discussions of tools and rubrics to assess teaching effectiveness or other aspects of professional performance.

3) A Faculty Development Center website. As the conversations with staff and faculty evolved over the course of my visit, it was clear that the *Faculty Development Center could come to serve a hub, drawing together RIT Kosovo (A.U.K.) staff and faculty, and providing relatively easy and timely access to relevant information and resources.* A website, organized by functional strand, with links to on-line resources available through RIT and elsewhere, would be extremely useful. I would recommend a structure that is fairly simple and easy to maintain. There is ample expertise at RIT Kosovo (A.U.K.) for its design and implementation.

4) Faculty “on-boarding”. Faculty development centers are often tasked with offering some sort of “new faculty orientation program” to welcome newcomers to their campuses. Particulars vary greatly, depending on the size of the campus, the number of new faculty, and the resources available. As new faculty join RIT Kosovo

(A.U.K.), it might be helpful to complement the activities and services already provided by the institution, to enable them to acclimate, to understand the workings of the campus, and to begin to feel assimilated into the community. One of the advantages of having the new Center play a significant role in this welcoming process is that faculty would then already be accustomed to turning to this resource for support as they move forward in their careers.

5) Faculty recognition and awards. Faculty development centers are also often the offices that host events to formally recognize faculty members for their efforts to go “above and beyond”, as they seek opportunities for professional development, and as they receive accolades of one kind or another for their efforts. Resources, permitting, the new Center might host an annual event to celebrate the efforts of the faculty and the members of the community (RIT Kosovo (A.U.K.) and otherwise) with whom they have worked.

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In closing, once again, I look forward to working with the administration, the faculty and the staff of RIT Kosovo (A.U.K.) as they continue to bring into sharper focus a vision for their new Faculty Development Center, as well as the specific plans and projects it will roll out. I look forward to contributing resources for faculty and offering further suggestions and trainings, as needs warrant. And I look forward to working with the staff of the Center to develop proposals for funding for the activities they seek to develop, as appropriate opportunities warrant.

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