FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

A Nontraditional Faculty Development Initiative Using a Social Media Platform

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Submitted January 15, 2014; accepted March 25, 2014; published June 17, 2014.

Objective. To assess the outcomes from an 11-year nontraditional professional development activity implemented by female faculty members at several colleges and schools of pharmacy.

Design. Within the context of an online fantasy football league, faculty members practiced community-based faculty development strategies, including peer mentoring, skills development, constructive feedback and other supportive behaviors.

Assessment. Data were extracted from curriculum vitae to characterize the academic progress of participants and to quantify scholarly work collaborations among league members. Analyses were limited to members who had participated in the league for 10 or more consecutive years. Seventy-one collaborative scholarly works occurred among team managers, including presentation of 20 posters and 2 oral presentations at national or international meetings, publication of 29 peer-reviewed articles and 15 book chapters, and funding of 5 research projects.

Conclusion. Social media platforms can foster nontraditional faculty development and mentoring by enhancing connectivity between pharmacy educators who share similar interests.

Keywords: mentor, inservice training, faculty development, pharmacy faculty, social media

INTRODUCTION

Institutionally generated faculty development and mentoring initiatives can fall prey to challenges similar to those of health-system infection control campaigns in that they can fail to consider the influence of human nature on behavior and the often delayed time course necessary for realizing persistent results.¹ As Type A professionals working in highly pressured academic environments, faculty members might lack effective skills for identifying or comfort with expressing when they would benefit from professionally supportive measures.² Furthermore, they can be resistant to initiatives that are applied universally without consideration of personal choice.³ These challenges can be particularly profound among women in academia,⁴ and in some fields have been shown to affect occupational commitment.⁵

Although faculty development programs typically include formal mentorship programs to assist faculty members in navigating academic waters,⁶⁻⁸ universities often struggle to operationalize an effective mentoring framework for such programs.⁸ Commonly, mentor-mentee pairs are housed within the same institution or even within the same department. This level of proximity can be helpful but is not always essential, and professional development programs can miss the mark by failing to consider and incorporate the broader academic community as a resource. Adapting research from teacher education, quality improvement, and workplace learning, O'Sullivan and Irby suggest a model that puts professional development research into context, prioritizing relationships and networks of association within the workplace community.⁹ In addition to providing a more generalizable platform for professional development research, this community-based model also addresses the perceived lack of "connectedness" that for some is a cause of professional isolation and unhappiness. Peer-to-peer,

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collaborative mentoring is one community-based strategy that the nursing and medical literature suggests as an effective recruitment and retention strategy; fostering academic workplaces “productive and pleasurable enough to attract and retain the best and the brightest.”^{10,11} This approach to faculty development offers an opportunity to consider a broader definition of “community,” and it affords expansion of the social academic network across sites as long as members share common goals, interests, and values. By capitalizing on social media and other resources that facilitate interconnectedness, faculty development programs and mentoring relationships can exist beyond the walls of traditional intra-institutional initiatives and contacts.

The emergence and ready adoption of the social media phenomenon provides the potential to build networks across disciplines and university settings¹²⁻¹⁴ and enables dissemination of information asynchronously using readily accessible, user-friendly formats. As yet, relatively few health professions programs have embraced social media formally for faculty development initiatives. The ubiquity, flexibility and organic nature of the tools, however, suggest that they are worthy of further exploration.¹⁴ With this in mind, this article will describe a social media-based faculty development approach utilized by female pharmacy faculty members across multiple universities. The platform for this faculty development initiative was Fantasy Football, an interactive competition in which league participants competed against each other as general managers of virtual teams comprising players in the National Football League (NFL). The manual version dates back to the mid-1960s, while Web-based adaptations became available in the late 1990s. Today several companies provide online platforms with various features and options for these popular competitions.¹⁵ In this article, we characterized league participation and managers, their academic progression over 11 football seasons, and intraleague collaborations.

DESIGN

In 2002, a group of 10 female pharmacy faculty members from the pharmacy practice and social administrative sciences fields, loosely connected through a shared interest in tobacco cessation activities and professional sports, created a private, virtual, fantasy football league (The Cat Fight League).

The Cat Fight League was based on the Yahoo (Sunnyvale, California) platform and involved each league member serving as a team manager in weekly head-to-head virtual football match-ups (ie, within the season each week each virtual team competed directly against a different

virtual team in the league). Via a live, online draft session, managers selected actual NFL players to comprise their team roster. After the initial draft, team managers set a lineup of active players weekly, and players could be added, dropped, or traded based on individual performance and team needs. Team managers chose a team name, designed an avatar to represent the team, and communicated with other managers via a series of discussion boards and chat forums.

During the weekly matchups, the team received the most points in each pairing received a win for that particular week. Points were gained through a statistical method based on NFL player performance in actual weekly football games. Operationalization of the point system was dictated by the private league’s scoring system, which was customizable by the league commissioner, who was one of the team managers. A team’s weekly total was the sum of all player points in the active lineup.

League members maintained regular contact through e-mail correspondence and assembled each July at the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy Annual Meeting in a social environment (eg, professional baseball game, dinner, happy hour) to congratulate one another on personal and professional achievements over the prior year. Additionally, throughout the year, members discussed academic challenges and brainstormed about potential collaborative teaching, service, and research projects.

League “rules” included payment of a nominal annual fee to participate (with winnings distributed annually to the top 4 performing teams), participation in a live draft held the week before the first game of the NFL season, and strict expectation for engagement requiring each manager to consistently set their team’s weekly (active) roster. When team manager positions became available as a result of attrition, new faculty members were recruited through an informal process. In 2012, the league was expanded to include 12 teams in order to accommodate increased interest in joining the league.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Over the course of 11 football seasons, 15 female pharmacy faculty members representing 14 different academic institutions across 2 countries participated in the league. Of these, 10 managers (67%) participated for 10 or more consecutive years. Over the 10-year period, 3 team managers were not invited back to the league because of negligence in setting weekly lineups (n=2) or failure to pay league dues (n=1). Two new managers were recruited in 2012 as a result of league expansion to comprise the active roster of 12 league managers.

To assess the success of the Cat Fight League in terms of faculty development, we extracted data from each league member's December 2013 curriculum vitae, and categorized scholarly work collaborations as (1) poster presentations at national or international professional meetings, (2) oral presentations at national or international professional meetings, (3) peer-reviewed publications, (4) book chapters, and (5) funded research projects, including formal roles as a project investigator or paid project consultant. Collaborations were counted only once, regardless of the number of league members who participated in the scholarly work. Data analyses included only team managers who were Cat Fight League members for 10 or more consecutive years.

At the time of entry into the league, 6 team managers were at the rank of assistant professor and 4 were at the rank of associate professor. In addition, 2 team managers were enrolled in part-time doctoral training. At the time of this assessment, 7 team managers were professors, 3 were associate professors, all had completed terminal doctoral degrees, and all 4 managers who had been on tenure track had been granted tenure. Sixty percent of the managers held administrative leadership posts: 2 were associate deans, 1 was a departmental chair, 1 was a departmental vice chair, and 1 was a departmental associate head. Five members transferred to a new institution (including 2 members who transferred twice) during the life of the league.

Seventy-one collaborative scholarly works occurred between team managers (Table 1), including 20 posters and 2 oral presentations at national or international meetings, 29 peer-reviewed publications, 15 book chapters, and 5 funded research projects (4 federally-funded and 1 corporate contract). Nine of the 10 league members accounted for all collaborations; however, the tenth member had submitted 1 collaborative NIH grant application that was not funded.

DISCUSSION

The Cat Fight League was not initiated formally as a faculty development program; however, over years of consistent play, the cohort recognized it as a valuable tool for enhancing scholarly productivity, career advancement, and personal fulfillment. The factors leading to academic success in this case study are complex and lend themselves better to descriptions of association rather than causation.

Many of the skills that are consistent with league play are also required for successful academic advancement – including, but not limited to prioritization, responsibility, and accountability to others, and proficiency with instructional technologies. The time period encompassing league play included substantial changes in educational practices such as the increasing use of instructional technologies (eg, learning management systems, smart phones, tablets) and changing methods for interactions (eg, discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs) that have challenged the way we communicated with both learners and peers. Indeed, team managers agree that many of the professional, sociobehavioral, and technological skills honed through league participation are consistent with those needed to be successful as a faculty member and educator. Furthermore, league members perceived the mentoring and support of other league members to be of great value, regardless of academic rank.

Perhaps the most significant yet less tangible impact of participation in the Cat Fight League has been in the lessons learned through the shared experiences of competitive league play. Some of these pearls of wisdom have meaningful parallels to pharmacy education and practice:

- **There are challenges associated with expansion.**

Too many teams in a league dilute the talent pool of players available for both the draft and weekly pickup options. As the academy considers the supply and demand of pharmacists and the number of

Table 1. Professional Collaborations Among Cat Fight League Members Between 2002 and 2013^a

Type of Scholarly Work	Number of Collaborations ^b	Range, per League Member	No. of League Members Participating in ≥ 1 work
Poster presentations at national or international professional meetings	20	0-16	7
Oral presentations at national or international professional meetings	2	0-1	4
Peer-reviewed publications	29	0-26	7
Book chapters	15	0-8	6
Funded research projects	5	0-5	5

^a Based on 10 faculty members who have been in the Cat Fight fantasy football league for 10 or more years and collaborations that included 2 or more participants.

^b Each item was counted only once, regardless of the number of league members who collaborated.

qualified educators needed to support them, this lesson is of particular relevance.

- **Heterogeneity typically outperforms homogeneity.** When managers blindly draft nearly all of their players from their favorite professional team, it results in a roster that can only glean points from 1 game each week. There are parallels between this practice and the risks encountered by programs that do not consciously strive for diversity, either as traditionally defined (eg, sex, race/ethnicity) or in the wider sense of educational attainment, professional experiences, viewpoints, and thoughts among faculty members, staff members, and trainees.
- **When possible, conclusions should be based on solid data.** The excitement that can surround a top-rated college recruit can distract from one who is a proven contributor at the professional level. As education and practice continue to evolve, it is possible that the latest and greatest teaching methods and practice guidelines dominating the press today (eg, massive open online courses and pharmacogenomic-based dosing of medicines) may ultimately perform less well than the tried and true.
- **Safe spaces for experimentation are valued.** Making moves on the waiver wire to add/drop players to/from one's bench and lineup is part of a willingness to engage in continuous quality improvement – reflect, recognize, and embrace change when it is indicated or desired. The league provides a safe venue to try new things, make some mistakes, and learn from them moving forward. This tenet can apply to the increasing competitiveness of grant funding or challenges associated with publishing. Just as league members learn to review their team's performance and try again the following week, faculty members learn to revise and resubmit their research/work based on feedback.
- **Connections are often transferable.** Academic pharmacy is a small world and as might be expected, a few team managers were at least casual acquaintances before the league began. The increased connectivity from communicating weekly during football season and at least annually at professional meetings has strengthened these bonds and forged new ones. This has made it easier to reach out to other league participants when professional and even personal matters arise. Indeed, as league members have progressed through various life events, league colleagues have been there to engage, congratulate, and offer support when appropriate. For those who have changed universities, the league has been a grounding support system during times of change.

Mentorship and collaboration can come in many forms and can be germinated in a variety of ways. Although the Cat Fight League was initiated as a group of faculty members who were loosely connected by shared interests, the group evolved and has witnessed a wide range of sustained, formal academic collaborations as well as mentoring relationships in the areas of research, teaching, and service. Because there is no comparison group, it is not possible to estimate the independent impact of the league on collaborative efforts. Furthermore, because the group was composed of only female faculty members in pharmacy practice or the social and administrative sciences (a group representing approximately 36% of all pharmacy faculty in the United States),¹⁶ the extent to which the outcomes can be extrapolated to other, unrepresented demographics is not known. It is notable, however, that all league members have remained in academia for more than a decade and have successfully advanced on the academic ladder, despite evidence that women in academia often have difficulty finding suitable mentors.¹⁷

SUMMARY

Participation in a fantasy football league—a volunteer, low-cost, organically derived, multi-university faculty development initiative based on a common social media platform—has been associated with positive professional and personal outcomes that collectively contribute to programmatic value. Because of the mutual benefits realized, league-associated outcomes have grown, spread, and been sustained, despite the absence of any academic funding or requirement. This type of informal, social media-based learning community is a reasonable and highly feasible option for faculty members seeking an alternative to or complement for traditional intra-institutional faculty development programs. In addition, if professional sports are not a unifying interest, the system could be adapted for other hobbies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge all present and past members of the Cat Fight League: Mitra Assemi (Mitzi Katzi), University of California, San Francisco; Tina Brock (Juju Saints), University of California, San Francisco; Robin Corelli (buds), University of California, San Francisco; Shareen El-Ibiary (Pharm Animals), Midwestern University, Glendale; Dana Hammer (Hammertime), University of Washington; Karen Hudmon (hockeyRULES, League Commissioner), Purdue University; Jan Kavookjian (Kavookly Krushers), Auburn University; Lisa Kroon (Krooner's Kats), University of California, San Francisco; Kelly Lee (Mavericks), University of California, San Diego;

Beth Martin (Beth's Blitzin Buds), University of Wisconsin-Madison; Helen Smith (Pink Malicious), University of the Incarnate Word; Marilyn Stebbins (Firestick), University of California, San Francisco; Cindy Stowe (Distilled Spirit), University of Arkansas; Candy Tsourounis (Trash Talkers), University of California, San Francisco; Sharon Youmans (Thunderbolts), University of California, San Francisco.

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