

## ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES

Institutional Award Winners' Retreat

Friday, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012

St. Thomas University

Fredericton, New Brunswick

Faculty Development Bulletin

Fall 2012

**Participants:** *Dr. Colin Laroque, Department of Geography and Environment, Mount Allison University; Dr. Heather Sparling, Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, Cape Breton University; Dr. Jason Pearson, Department of Chemistry, University of Prince Edward Island; Dr. Colleen Barber, Department of Biology, Saint Mary's University; Dr. Sandra MacDonald, School of Nursing, Memorial University*

**Facilitators:** *Dr. Shelagh Crooks, Department of Philosophy, Saint Mary's University  
Dr. Ann Bigelow, Department of Psychology, St. Francis Xavier University*

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*Seven university teachers came together on a cold fall afternoon in Fredericton. They were a diverse group: a geographer, an ethnomusicologist, a chemist, a biologist, a nurse, a philosopher and a psychologist. What they had in common was an abiding passion for teaching their students and a commitment to leading educational initiatives in their own universities.*

*Each one had achieved institutional recognition for his/her outstanding accomplishment as a teacher, and each was a leader of teachers. Their conversation was focussed, reflective and authentic.*

### **Teaching the Students We Have**

From various communications that occurred prior to the retreat, it was clear to the facilitators that the group had a particular concern to understand the experiences, expectations, and learning challenges of the students they teach. Such

understanding would be a necessary preliminary to developing teaching practices capable of speaking to the students' lived reality. Discussion focussed primarily on two groups: international and aboriginal students.

- It was noted that within the AAU family, Cape Breton University and Saint Mary's have significant populations of international students (at CBU international students make up 26% of the student body, and at SMU international students represent 30% of the student population). Many of these international students experience difficulty reading and writing in the language of instruction and assessment, and so are at increased risk of failing language intensive courses such as those in the Arts. It was agreed that further steps must be taken by institutions and by individual instructors to

accommodate the specific language needs of this group. Several programs for international students were discussed, including St. Francis Xavier's month-long summer course for international students. This course is designed to integrate incoming students into Canadian university culture, with an emphasis on developing the students' English language competency. It is thought to be very successful in addressing the needs of international students, and could be a model for other AAU universities to consider, adapt and/or adopt.

- It was noted that while all students experience some form of culture shock during the first few months in university, aboriginal students are particularly at risk for this. Often, these students experience problems of "cultural belonging", which can in turn, have a significant impact on their ability to be successful in university. For example, aboriginal students are sometimes ostracized within their home communities for trying to be "better than" those who do not go to university. And, thus, they are caught between two cultures – the familiar one of their childhood (which they are seen to reject) and the culture of the university, which is foreign to them. Further, it was noted that many aboriginal students have not had access to institutional resources and practices which most domestic and international students take for granted. For instance, aboriginal students may not have used a library, or, indeed, ever have been in a library. Such students can be at a loss to understand the role that libraries (and similar institutional

structures and resources) can play in learning and inquiry. Aboriginal students represent a relatively new but growing demographic among AAU universities. Their unique cultural experience would seem to call for a targeted intervention -- one which specifically addresses the disconnect between their previous experience and the expectations and practices of the university.

- International and aboriginal students, as well as domestic students, are less than ideally attuned to the inquiry culture of the university. They see themselves as passive recipients of information from authoritative sources, rather than as fellow inquirers, who have a role to play in the development of ideas. As faculty we need to be sensitive to this fact about our students, and take measures to explain and demonstrate how the discourse of the university classroom works, how it differs from their previous classroom experience, and the nature of the new role the students have as inquirers and knowledge-builders.

### **Valuing Teaching in the University**

There was strong consensus among the group that relative to the research mission of the university, the teaching mission is significantly undervalued. Given this perception, participants were concerned to inquire into the question of what (further) measures the AAU might take to advance the cause of university teaching across the region.

- It was noted that teaching effectiveness is not as easily measured as research effectiveness, which means that good

teaching can easily go unnoticed. For instance, it is not entirely clear how we are to evaluate the qualitative information in a teaching dossier. Accordingly, the retreat participants recommend that the AAU conduct research into the relevant teaching assessment literature, with a view to developing guidelines for such assessment. This document could be circulated to constituent universities for consideration.

- It was noted that research offices have grown in funds and staff, while teaching offices often remain understaffed and/or underfunded. We believe that teaching offices play a valuable role in the teaching development of faculty, and in supporting the general teaching mission of the university. Thus we recommend that the AAU (possibly through its Faculty Development Committee) monitor this trend and, where possible and appropriate, speak to its impact on teaching in the university.
- It was noted that some AAU universities have language in their collective agreements which recognizes scholarly inquiry into teaching, as scholarship equivalent to disciplinary scholarship. (The Collective Agreement of Saint Mary's University is a case in point.) This is by no means true across the board for AAU collective agreements. While we recognize the reality that such agreements are a product of collective bargaining between university faculty unions and administration, we see some virtue of encouraging universities in the AAU to recognize the positive connection between teaching and

scholarly inquiry into teaching. And so, we recommend that the AAU develop a clear position on this for circulation to its constituent universities.

- Universities teach their graduate students how to conduct disciplinary research, but rarely do they teach them how to teach. This is a regrettable fact of life in universities. However, we believe that good teaching is not accidental, but the product of reflection over time, dialogue with colleagues, research and experimentation. We recommend that the AAU develop and sponsor a teaching certification/development program, held yearly, for perhaps a week during the spring/summer. This could involve all the universities in the AAU. In principle, each institution could contribute to this program by developing and delivering 1-2 sessions on best teaching practices, teaching issues in general, and so on.
- To facilitate the development of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and to enhance its profile as a form of research across the AAU, we recommend that the AAU publish the scholarship (in whole or in part) of selected faculty scholars in an annual or semi-annual newsletter.