

SHRE Paper Proposal – LTA stream

Title: Forty years on: What now?

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Abstract

Forty years ago, Cross (1976) asserted that universities must continue to expand and improve its knowledge of the teaching-learning process, and must utilize this knowledge in the improvement of its teaching programs, both on- and off-campus, with particular emphasis at the undergraduate level. Cross further argued that since perceptions and attitudes are critical to the improvement of teaching programs, soliciting the attitudes, perceptions, and recommendations of the teaching faculty is key to understanding how to move forward. The Cross (1976) survey findings concluded that it would be unlikely teaching practices will change with current faculty. Forty years later, have faculty attitudes, perceptions and practices changed? We replicated the Cross survey in two very different Canadian Universities. While there are some notable differences between institutions, key areas highlighted in the Cross survey remain the same forty years on.

Introduction

In 1976 a study was commissioned by a university that in most respects is “a thoroughly typical university—drawing its faculty from the traditions of academe, but now experiencing hard pressures for change” (Cross, 1977, p. 8). The rationale for the study was to gain insights on how to improve teaching practices. Based on the findings, it was concluded that “when more than 90% of faculty members rate themselves as above-average teachers, and two-thirds rate themselves among the top quarter, the outlook for much improvement in teaching seems less than promising” (p. 1).

Cross (1977) also concluded that it will likely take a new generation of faculty to begin to see the implementation of new approaches to teaching, predicting we will not see changes until 2001 when a new wave of faculty will replace the current faculty hired in the 1960s. In this study we ask, was Cross’s prediction accurate?

Methods

The Cross Survey was initiated with 42 semi-structured interviews with purposively selected faculty from Nebraska University, followed by survey construction. The survey was then mailed to more than a 1000 faculty members at Nebraska University in the spring. We replicated the survey at the University of Alberta (a large and traditional research focused Canadian university) and at Mount Royal University (a medium-sized teaching focused Canadian institution, newly transitioned from a college to a university)

Using a type II replication research design (Easley, Madden & Dunn, 2000), we created an online survey also randomly selecting 50% of faculty members at the University of Alberta, with 819 survey invitations emailed, and a total of 520 usable responses (response rate of 63.5%). Since

Mount Royal University is a smaller university, a decision was made to select 100% of faculty members to ensure sufficient numbers for a reliable comparative analysis, with 371 survey invitations sent and a total of 180 usable responses (response rate of 48.5%). Descriptive and statistical analyses were conducted with the closed survey responses; open-ended responses were analyzed using generic qualitative coding techniques (Merriam, 2009). This paper focuses on closed items.

Survey Participants: Participation and Demographics

Demographic information for participants from all three institutions is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic data

		Percent		
		University of Alberta	Mount Royal University	University of Nebraska
Age	55 or >	42%	32%	16%
	45-54	34%	40%	23%
	44 or less	24%	28%	61%
Sex	Male	60%	46%	74%
	Female	40%	54%	26%
Rank	Assistant Professor	14%	16%	30%
	Associate Professor	29%	64%	26%
	Full Professor	55%	18%	31%
	Other	2%	2%	13%

Overview of Survey Responses

The Cross (1976) findings stated the following reasons for why it would be unlikely teaching practices will change with current faculty:

1. There is a prevailing perception teaching is already quite good.
2. Most faculty do not know how to improve instruction except through:
 - a. spending more time on preparation,
 - b. updating course content,
 - c. participating with students in the subject area,
 - d. smaller classes, and/or
 - e. improving instructional materials through better equipment.

As in the 1976 survey, our survey data (see Table 2) reveals that there continues to be a prevailing perception that teaching is already quite good. Regarding ways to improve teaching (see Table 3 below), there are both similarities and differences on survey items, showing important areas of overlap but also distinction between the three universities. Additionally, Table 4 also shows similarities and differences in faculty perceptions regarding their role as teacher.

Table 2

How would you rate your teaching in an academic term?

	Percent [†]		
	University of Alberta	Mount Royal University	University of Nebraska
Outstanding - top 10%	28%	24%	21%
Very good - top 25%	51%	52%	47%
Good – upper half	18%	20%	26%
Below average	> 1%	> 1%	1%
Cannot say	3%	3%	5%

[†]Note: a t-test demonstrated no significant difference between means for University of Alberta ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.87$) and Mount Royal University ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.84$).

Table 3

Indicate how important you think each of the following would be to improve teaching

	Percent [†]		
	University of Alberta	Mount Royal University	University of Nebraska
a) A periodic review of the teaching performance of all faculty, tenured or not.	56%	52%	55%
b) More release time during the academic year for working on course improvement.	50%	64%	57%
c) Workshops run by experts on instructional enhancement techniques (e.g., curriculum (re)development).	39%	51%	30%
d) Required training for graduate teaching assistants.	63%	50%	57%
e) An unambiguous commitment to recognize good teaching at the same level as good research with salary and/or promotion.	76%	72%	81%
f) Improved student evaluations of teaching	53%	51%	37%
g) Regular on-campus seminars on the improvement of teaching.	41%	57%	32%
h) An increase in the number of awards given for outstanding teaching performance.	33%	35%	31%
i) More funds to support the improvement of teaching.	58%	72%	48%

[†]Shows percentage for (1) extremely important and (2) very important responses.

Table 4

What is the best description of your role as a teacher?

	Percent		
	University of Alberta	Mount Royal University	University of Nebraska
One who provides information about subject matter	24%	12%	19%
One who leads discussions on subject matter	19%	20%	9%
One who manages learning activities	16%	17%	25%
One who directs individual learning	6%	12%	14%
One who participates with students in exploring the subject matter	34%	40%	33%

Conclusions

While Cross (1977) declared that it will take a new generation of faculty members to begin to see the implementation of new approaches to teaching, our survey data show several areas in which faculty perceptions remain similar. Notably, an overwhelming majority of faculty at both teaching and research universities in this study still perceive their teaching to be outstanding or very good.

Over the past five decades, higher education has seen an increase in the research and in the practice of providing professional development through workshops, seminars, and structured programs. The survey results in this study indicate that, despite these evolutions in both research and practice, several teaching perceptions and self-reported practices remain to be similar over forty years later. The reasons for these similarities and differences are worthy of further exploration.

References

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