Identifying Faculty Bright Spots

One of the greatest benefits of a community of practice for instructors is the opportunity to learn from their peers about successful strategies to improve students' experiences. There are many strategies you can use to encourage faculty to share their experiences with one another. This can range from organic sharing to deliberate efforts to use data to identify faculty with "bright spots", or outliers with positive variation in outcomes. Identifying these bright spots is an opportunity to illuminate learning about factors or aspects in approach that should be replicated elsewhere.

On many SEP campuses, the practice of examining student experience data to identify bright spots was a particularly successful approach to elevate successful practices and promote spread to others. For SEP, bright spots pointed to faculty with data showing significant improvement in one or more dimensions of student experience, or consistently positive student experience over time. This usually meant faculty were seeing gains in student experience when others in their community were stagnant, and/or significant positive improvements in student experience for students from structurally disadvantaged backgrounds. Identifying this positive variation in your data can accelerate the spread of effective practices between faculty.

Analyzing data to look for bright spots also offers a chance to celebrate these "outliers" in a community and to learn more deeply from each other about which combination of changes - or specific ways of implementing them - are most powerful. Taking dedicated time during your community of practice meetings to acknowledge and celebrate faculty with bright spot data, along with uplifting successful strategies they've utilized to improve student experience, can be a positive learning opportunity for your entire community, and can help to scale improvements. You can use these opportunities to identify and highlight champions (see Sharing and Recognizing Bright Spots Beyond Your Community of Practice for suggestions) and give them experience sharing more about their teaching practice. This helps to spread changes throughout your community and enables others to adapt these strategies.

Analyzing Data to Identify Bright Spots (Positive Variation)

Here are some specific criteria you might use when identifying bright spots:

- **Consistently positive results:** When faculty have consistently high student experience across multiple constructs, or are seeing steady increases over the course of the term, it is likely they are using many effective practices and frequently reflecting on their data.

- **Significant increase in a specific dimension of student experience**: Some practices are designed to target certain aspects of student experience. Keep an eye out for instructors who see large gains in particular constructs - they may be able to help other instructors who may be having difficulty with this same construct.

- **Significant improvements for structurally disadvantaged populations:** When instructors have significant gains for structurally disadvantaged groups, they may be closing or eliminating gaps in student experience overall. Learning from these instructors about their successful practices can be of benefit to everyone in the community of practice.

- **Check participation rates:** To ensure that positive trends are based on a representative sample of students, seek out bright spot practices that have at least 50% student participation in efforts to learn their experiences. In the case of SEP, we looked for this minimum participation rate with students participating in [Ascend](#) surveys.

- **Look for multiple observation points**: One can learn more from trends in data when there are multiple observation points. Look for bright spot data from faculty who have done at least three rounds of data collection with students. This may not be feasible during the first semester of your community of practice, but is a great exercise to do at least at the end of each term to identify faculty to take on more leadership in the community of practice. If feasible, running multiple rounds throughout the term is ideal, (e.g., beginning, middle (to capture midterm exams) and end).

- **Seek out qualitative student feedback:** In the SEP, students were able to provide open-ended comments in Ascend. This kind of feedback augments other learning from student data. Ask instructors if they received any comments about practices used in their course. Many instructors in the SEP, for example, indicated that their students mentioned the course syllabus in the Ascend surveys; this was a great way for campuses to identify faculty with outstanding syllabi.

Elevating Bright Spot Practices

After identifying these bright spot data, you may want to learn more about the changes or practices that contributed to these gains. Reach out to the instructors with bright spot data and ask them to describe at least one change idea or practice they believe contributed to their results. Asking faculty to document some of this information upfront will help you find the right opportunity to share these ideas with your community of practice. Here are some questions you might want to ask them:

- Brief description of the change idea/practice
- What resources, if any, did you use to inform his practice (e.g., [SEP Practices Library](#))?
- What resources did you need to put this change idea into practice?
- What tips or tricks do you have for those wanting to implement this change idea or practice?
- What, if any, barriers did you face in implementing this practice? How did you overcome them?
- What would you do differently the next time?
- Do you have any video examples, templates or other resources you could share with colleagues to help them adapt this practice for their own classrooms?

It is important to note that positive outliers may have tacit knowledge that is so second nature to how they do their work. This may make it difficult for them to identify what is unique about their approach or context. In this case, it may be helpful to observe faculty with bright spot data directly to glean insights and unique factors that may lead to their positive outcomes.

Once insights about successful practices are gleaned, invite faculty to share their practices with other faculty/instructors within communities of practice to spread ideas faster. Depending on how you run your community of practice, there are a variety of ways you can accomplish this, including:

- **Faculty spotlights during meetings**: Take 10 minutes at each community of practice meeting to invite an instructor to share their successful practice
- **Panels or roundtables**: Invite 3 - 4 instructors to share their practices as part of a panel or roundtable discussion during a community of practice meeting or workshop.
- **Invite faculty to facilitate workshops**: If an instructor has a particularly creative or effective practice that has led to improvements in student experience, consider inviting this individual to facilitate a workshop on the practice. For example, you can have a workshop on exam wrappers, and invite faculty who have successfully utilized this practice to speak to their experience.

- **Share practices over email**: If you send regular email updates or a newsletter to your community of practice participants, consider highlighting faculty with bright spot data in these messages.
- **Shadow and/or film practices in action:** Encourage faculty to observe each other directly or film their practices in action. This can help others to learn faster how to adopt new practices as well as to deepen insights.

Additionally, we recommend storing documentation from faculty about their bright spot practices in any shared drives, websites, or other file-sharing mechanisms you've already set up for your community of practice.

There are examples of this type of learning in SEP's Fall 2020 Bright Spot publication, highlighting the work of nine instructors across the SEP network and examples of practices they used to improve student experience.

Sharing and Recognizing Bright Spots Beyond Your Community of Practice

Recognizing faculty beyond your community of practice is a great way to elevate their expertise and spread the word about the value of the community of practice on your campus. Here are some suggestions for recognizing instructors and promoting their success in the classroom:

- **On social media**
  - Your university's Twitter and Facebook pages and on LinkedIn
- **Within your campus**
  - Senior leader reach outs or acknowledgements of great work
  - University and department websites
  - University marketing and communication resources
  - Campus newspaper
  - Lunch & Learn events
- **Externally**
  - Blog posts
  - Higher-ed newsletters
  - Local news organizations
  - Conferences/meetings

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