

Driving Innovative, Relationship-Rich Change: The 2024 International Conference of the POD Network

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Abstract

Higher education faces significant challenges, and Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) are a critical partner for senior leadership in both advising and addressing them. Educational developers who lead CTLs have demonstrated expertise in two key areas essential for innovative learning: research on student learning and research on faculty as learners. Their success often stems from a relationship-rich approach.

Keywords: Higher education, relationship-rich, Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs), Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network Conference

Introduction

Institutions of higher education face multiple challenges: decreased perceived value of a college degree, declining traditional age student demographics, the need to provide transparency in student learning outcomes, financial shortages, and changing student needs that require shifts in teaching approaches. Addressing these challenges requires innovation and change. One strategic partner for accomplishing innovative change is your institution’s Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL).

CTLs are perfect change partners. Educational developers and other faculty and staff in CTLs have experience in and passion for change.

Through relationship-rich interactions and programs, CTLs inspire faculty to adopt innovative teaching and research-based student success strategies, create synergies with other student-success units on campus, and help fulfill strategic priorities. CTLs have been change agents for a long time (Wright, 2023).

CTLs’ role in innovative, relationship-rich change was evident in the 50th (2024) annual conference of the professional organization that supports CTLs: The Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education. The November 2024 theme of the POD Network Conference highlighted the power of relationship-rich interactions to advance change. Members from across the United States and some

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global areas gathered to share successful practices, learn the latest teaching and learning research, and present innovative change that CTLs either initiated or supported.

In this special issue of *Perspectives*, we synthesize critical emerging trends in CTL work as evidenced at the 2024 POD Network Conference. This special issue summarizes three CTL focus areas that emerged as most significant from the conference: student success and retention, faculty success and vitality, and institutional resilience and innovation. This issue hence highlights three pathways to consider for partnering with your institution's CTL to help you drive the innovation your strategic plan requires.

Definitions

Higher education institutions have wide-ranging leadership structures for CTLs, including a single faculty member with partial or full teaching release and/or staff members with some workload allocated to the CTL; a faculty committee with rotating members; and a full-time CTL team comprised of educational developers, graduate students, and additional faculty/staff members. Because of the diverse configurations of CTL leadership, the term CTL will be used in this special issue when referencing the work of a center regardless of its specific configuration. The term educational developers will be used to represent CTL leaders engaged with teaching and learning scholarship and with the POD Network.

Professionalization of CTLs and Educational Developers

CTLs are uniquely positioned to influence instructors* and support student success by impacting teaching strategies and cultivating an innovative institutional culture.

CTLs and educational developers are effective positive change facilitators because of their professional expertise. The POD Network is the largest organization of educational developers in North America, representing members from over 1300 different CTLs in every state and over 30 countries. At the 2024 annual conference, educational developers showcased successful educational development initiatives and scholarly work from POD member institutions worldwide. Across over a hundred sessions, educational developers discussed processes, theories, and initiatives for generating, tracking, and responding to change.

Like any field, educational development constantly updates research to expand knowledge related to teaching, learning, and academic success. There are dozens of journals that publish this research, among which [To Improve the Academy](#) is the POD Network's flagship peer-reviewed publication.

POD members also research educational (or faculty) development. Educational developers and CTL staff are expert teachers *of faculty*. CTLs prioritize building relationships with faculty and among faculty in their workshops, course design institutes, faculty certificate programs because relationship connections can motivate faculty to adapt their teaching practices. CTLs have expertise in promoting best practices while

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respecting faculty autonomy and authority in their classrooms.

Most CTLs apply to their clients, *faculty*, the four principles of relationship-rich education for *student* learning, which are summarized in Peter Felten and Leo Lambert's research:

1. Faculty should experience genuine welcome and care;
2. Faculty should be inspired to learn and make improvements in their teaching;
3. Faculty should develop a rich web of relationships among their colleagues;
4. Faculty should feel a deep sense of belonging at their institution such that "their presence and contributions make a positive difference" (Felten and Lambert, p.19).

Equipping and inspiring faculty to adopt research-based best practices for today's learners requires a relationship-rich learning environment, which CTLs prioritize and which the 2024 POD Network Conference adopted as the conference theme. All three POD Network Conference topics in this special issue reflect strong elements of relationship-rich learning.

How do educational developers facilitate change to increase student success?

Educational developers play a key role in supporting instructors as they adapt to the changing landscape of higher education, especially given that today's students are diverse and have unique challenges and strengths. By equipping instructors with the tools and strategies to create relationship-rich learning environments that support all students, CTLs contribute to student

success. In this special issue's article, "Student Success and Retention" Kim, Tilstra, and Parker explain six trends in student demographics that affect their learning needs and then share how CTLs contribute to student learning success.

How do educational developers facilitate change in faculty success and retention?

Faculty face increasing challenges, such as student demographic changes, budget reductions, and the rise of AI. CTLs provide safe spaces for experimentation and innovation, equipping faculty to adapt to evolving student needs, technological advancements, and pedagogical shifts. These changes ultimately enhance the effectiveness of instructors and energize teaching. CTLs do the heavy back-end work of research and then teach this research to faculty, *modeling the best practices* they teach. This work relieves faculty of significant time, effort, emotion, and energy, which enhances faculty well-being overall. CTLs' investment in faculty enables institutions to create a positive and thriving academic environment where both faculty and students feel valued, supported, and inspired to succeed. In "Supporting and Retaining Vital Faculty" (in this issue), Johannesen-Schmidt, Parker, and Tilstra explore how CTLs help faculty navigate these challenges, highlighting the role of CTLs in providing institutional support for faculty vitality and in fostering a positive and inclusive campus culture where both faculty and students feel valued and empowered to grow.

How do educational developers support institutional resilience?

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CTLs provide four functions for their institutions: sieve, hub, incubator, and temple (Wright, 2023). Their skills in these four functions make them perfect partners in accomplishing strategic change initiatives. Dutt and Bird's "Future-Proofing Institutions" explains how CTLs' expertise in these four functions help institutions respond to shifting needs with resilience.

** Since scholarship on teaching and learning uses both "faculty" and "instructor," we have used these terms interchangeably in this publication.*

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