

The 'Conversation' Continues: UMass Lilly Teaching Fellows Program Builds on First Ten Years

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When you've got a good thing going, how do you insure that it continues? Even better, how do you improve it?

Those were the questions facing the UMass Center for Teaching (CFT) in 1996 when a 10-year retrospective study of the Lilly Teaching Fellows early career faculty development program indicated that participants rated it a success. Based on a survey of the fellows, the study concluded that the program had significant positive effects on teaching skills and attitudes, collegiality, research, and service. The study also assessed the major components of the Lilly program and identified strengths and areas for improvement (List, 1997).

The survey results were, in essence, a valentine to the Center--but a valentine from which lessons could be learned. The CFT director, based in part on the study, made changes in a program that already was working well in hopes that its success would not only continue but grow.

Five years now have elapsed, and 40 additional fellows have participated in and assessed the effectiveness of the Lilly program. Has a good thing, in fact, gotten better? And if so, how? The purpose of this report is to answer those questions. In doing so, it will: summarize lessons learned from the survey of the first 10 years of the Lilly Teaching Fellows Program; discuss programmatic changes made in response to that survey and assess their effectiveness based on responses to the second survey of 1996-2001 fellows; assess the impact of those changes on fellows' classroom work and their professional lives generally by comparing responses to both surveys; and offer other observations about the program's impact and thoughts on its next five years.

Readers are asked to remember that while findings are based on response rates of 63% (1996) and 62% (2001), the survey samples are fairly small: 70 and 40 respectively. The cohorts also are different in that the first survey covered ten years of Lilly classes, and the second, five. Finally, different climates at the University during these two time periods may have influenced some responses in ways that cannot be measured here. This article's presentation of findings, for all of these reasons, is often more thematic than tied to specific numbers.

In addition, it should be noted that the author of both the first study and this report was a Lilly Fellow herself in 1990-01 and has been involved with the program for 12 years: twice as a mentor, three times as the Center's Faculty Associate, annually as a presenter and, for the past five years, as a member of the Lilly Fellows Selection Committee. My hope is that this long, in-depth involvement with the Lilly program informs my interpretation of the survey data, my assessment of its meaning and my thoughts on the future.

In terms of program components, evidence from the new survey will show that changes in the Lilly program's mentoring and bi-weekly meetings have dramatically increased their usefulness to fellows, while satisfaction with other aspects of the program has remained high. Fellows also indicate that the program continues to impact their classroom work and professional lives in very positive ways.

A Good Thing Going: 1996

The University's Lilly Teaching Fellows Program began in 1986 as a three-year experiment in teaching improvement funded by the Lilly Endowment. The Endowment funded similar programs at more than 40 universities to provide junior faculty the opportunity to learn about, reflect on and improve teaching. UMass was one of about one-third of those institutions that continued to fund the program beyond those initial three years. The program, as one fellow said, became a "continuing conversation on teaching."

The UMass Lilly program, directed by the Center For Teaching, typically selects eight pre-tenure faculty from diverse disciplines who are appointed for one-year fellowships. Most have been at the University for one to five years. Components of the program include: a retreat; release time from teaching, usually one course for each of two semesters; bi-weekly meetings with fellows; individual teaching projects; teaching consultations, which can include mid-semester feedback, assessment of syllabi and tests, class visits, and videotaping; contact with a senior mentor; and the annual Celebration of Teaching dinner each spring.

The effectiveness of each of these seven components was rated by respondents in the first survey of the program at its 10 year mark. The survey asked ten classes of Lilly fellows, 70 participants in all, to rate the extent to which the seven components were helpful to them personally. Possible answers ranged from "not at all" to "very greatly." Based on that 1996 survey, the percentage of fellows rating program components helpful to a great or very great extent were as follows:

Release Time	83%
Teaching Projects	78%
Consultations	75%
Bi-weekly Meetings	73%
Retreat	65%
Teaching Dinner	58%
Mentors	27%

A majority of fellows, then, considered six of the seven components helpful to a great or very great extent. Only the program's mentoring aspect clearly needed attention. Using the survey study as a blueprint, the CFT set out to keep the Lilly program on its strong course, while working to improve several of the program's components.

Changes in Mentors and Meetings: 2001

In 1996, several key changes were instituted as the CFT began work with the program's 11th class of fellows. Those changes included more guidance around selection of and work with mentors, a refined process for selecting fellows, and a more structured syllabus for bi-weekly

meetings. Based on the most recent survey of Lilly fellows from the past five years, those changes seem to have contributed to significant increases in the percentages of fellows rating these two aspects of the program helpful to a great or very great extent: Mentors, 67% (up from 27%), and Bi-weekly Meetings, 92% (up from 73%). Mentors and meetings are discussed below in relation to comments from the 1996 survey, specific changes made and comments from the 2001 survey.

Mentors

Based on surveys returned by the first 10 classes of Lilly fellows, this clearly was the one area with which many had been dissatisfied. Some 57% of respondents had said the mentor relationship was only somewhat helpful, and 16% said it was helpful to a little extent or not at all. At the same time, many fellows recognized the great potential for this aspect of the program, asking for more guidance in selecting a mentor and more structure around the relationship. "It's too good an opportunity to lose," one wrote.

The CFT responded by beginning to discuss with all new Lilly fellows how they might choose a mentor. Each new fellow now receives a packet explaining the role and responsibilities of the mentor, along with an explanation of who can be a mentor and lists of former fellows, mentors and Distinguished Teaching Award winners, as a starting point in thinking about whom to select. Based on fellows' interests, the Center also can suggest specific individuals who might meet stated needs. Fellows then are encouraged to talk with potential mentors to determine if they might be a good fit. Some telephone those whose names have been suggested. Others meet them for coffee. This allows for more informed choices, and both the fellows and the mentors gain clearer ideas of those with whom they will be working and of their expectations.

Once a mentor is selected, the packet also explains the sorts of activities in which past mentor-mentee pairs have engaged. They have "observed each other's classes, shared syllabi, worked on research together, discussed academic politics, tenure and promotion and considered the challenges of balancing professional and personal spheres." What had been described as a "nebulous" relationship by an earlier fellow also is clarified by continuing to bring former Lilly fellows to the retreat to discuss their experiences and to offer their insights on mentoring. A fall fellow/mentor dinner has been continued, and fellows also are encouraged to invite their mentors to campuswide teaching workshops held throughout the year.

The 1996 study had suggested consideration of another mentoring model: two to four master teachers mentoring an entire Lilly class. This idea also has been developed to some extent, with each Lilly class visiting the classrooms of distinguished teachers, then having those teachers attend a meeting to talk with fellows about what they observed. These classroom visits were extremely popular with more recent fellows, as were presentations by distinguished teachers at bi-weekly meetings.

All of these changes clearly improved this component of the program for many participants, as indicated by the 40-point increase in those finding it very helpful. One respondent wrote: "The mentor relationship was extraordinarily helpful and affirmative."

Bi-Weekly Meetings

Perhaps the most change came about in the series of bi-weekly seminars, which had been very popular with 73% of the first 10 classes of fellows, a number that jumped to 92% in the second survey. This made it the highest rated component of the program in both surveys combined. Two changes contributed significantly to increased satisfaction with the seminars: refining the process for selecting each Lilly class and adding a syllabus that articulates goals and expectations for the seminar and other program elements.

Acceptance into the Lilly program is highly competitive, with about 30 applications each year for eight places. Fellows are nominated by their department chairs. In 1996, the CFT director appointed three former fellows to assist in the selection of the Lilly class.

The selection committee reviews the letters of nomination and the candidates' resumes prior to interviewing each candidate. During these half-hour interviews, applicants discuss their teaching responsibilities, how they get to know students, classroom innovations they have undertaken, their strengths and challenges in the classroom, how they assess their teaching, ideas for a project they will undertake during the Lilly year, and why they want to become fellows. The same information is gathered on each candidate, yet no two interviews are the same.

After all applicants have been interviewed, the selection committee begins the difficult task of choosing eight fellows for the following academic year. Careful attention to the selection process seems to have worked well in putting together dynamic, compatible Lilly classes, whose members look forward to coming together every other week.

The bi-weekly meetings were described by a fellow from the program's first ten years as "the heart of the [Lilly] work," and that remains the case. But the meetings have been improved through a heightened awareness of the importance of clear goals, communication of expectations, and a structure to meet those goals. Over the last few years, the CFT director has developed a more detailed course syllabus and clearer guidelines for course projects and presentations.

The syllabus states the primary goals for the seminar: "to develop a common understanding of the kinds of teaching practices that promote student learning, to support your development as teachers and to provide a community of conversation about teaching and learning." Topics within the seminar center on three broad themes: student-faculty communication, student engagement, and course-based assessment.

In Fall 2001, for example, syllabus topics included: what we know about how students learn, using student learning outcomes as the basis for course planning, and active learning—getting students engaged. Each seminar also includes assigned readings from *Tools for Teaching* (1993), as well as supplementary readings. The last few meetings each semester are devoted to the fellows "taking stock" of their individual teaching projects and sharing the results with the other Lilly fellows.

The more recent bi-weekly meetings have managed to retain the informal collegiality so prized by early Lilly fellows, while adding the structure appreciated by more recent ones. In doing so, the meetings continue to be, as one fellow wrote, “the key to establishing a Lilly consciousness in my academic life.”

Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner

The one component of the UMass Lilly program that received significantly lower scores in the second survey was the annual Celebration of Teaching dinner. Only 29% of respondents (down from 58%) said it was helpful to a great or very great extent, while 54% said it was helpful to some extent. The CFT is aware of this shift in perception of the event and plans to seek feedback from current fellows about their experience of the dinner. Still, the hundreds of teachers who come to the dinner annually consider it the year’s best reminder of what teachers are all about and see it as a cherished tradition on campus.

The More Things Change. . .

Recent fellows’ positive responses to the remaining four elements of the Lilly program held steady or increased when compared to the reactions of earlier fellows. In both surveys, a healthy majority--ranging from 67% up to 83%-- found the retreat, release time from teaching, teaching projects and teaching consultations helpful to a great or very great extent.

Consistently positive responses across both surveys to these elements of the program, however, have not kept the Center from attempting to improve them. The retreat, projects and consultations, for example, have shifted focus from professors’ teaching to students’ learning, and other changes have been made as well, some in response to reactions from early fellows.

The retreat is one such example. Both early and more recent fellows said that this off-campus event set the stage, tone and focus for the year. They described it as “an opportunity for an intimate sharing of ideas and experiences” that served as an “invaluable introduction” to the program. The Center, following suggestions from early fellows, moved the retreat from spring (“a time for closure, not new beginnings”) to fall, a time when fellows are ready to focus on a new teaching year. Both new and former Lilly fellows who come together to participate in this two-day program say they feel rejuvenated and more ready to start teaching the next week, thanks to the program’s inspiration.

Another change related to teaching projects and consultations is their inclusion in the syllabus for the seminar. Fellows are encouraged as they do their bi-weekly reading assignments to “think about ways you could apply what you have learned to your own teaching” and to use their course projects as a “testing ground” for ideas discussed. The syllabus also includes specific guidelines for reporting on innovations and course changes mid-way through the year and at the year’s end.

The syllabus also points out that the CFT director will meet one-on-one with fellows prior to the start of the fellowship to talk about plans not only for their projects but also for consultations. The director visits all fellows’ classes and provides them with feedback. In addition, all fellows are required to participate in a mid-semester student feedback process that helps fellows gauge

how and what students are learning and, which teaching methods best contribute to students' understanding. The syllabus suggests that "taking stock" reports also might include discussion of "outcomes of a CFT-based teaching development consultation (e.g., student feedback, a class visit or a videotape) or consultation with your mentor." Asking all fellows to try out at least one method of assessing their teaching and its impact on students has prevented them from suffering the fate of one early participant: "I will long regret," he wrote, "not seizing the moment."

Impact on Classroom Work/Professional Lives Remains High

Comparing responses on questions that go to the impact of the Lilly year on fellows' teaching and professional lives shows that the program has remained as effective in its most recent five years as it was in its first ten, if not more so.

Fellows still apply to the program for the same reasons: to learn about good teaching and to have the opportunity to talk with colleagues who value teaching. One respondent to the 2001 survey confessed to wanting release time from teaching in order to do research to prepare for tenure, but another wrote: "[Becoming] a better teacher. . . was really my primary and only motivation for applying. The release time did not factor into my decision, largely because I enjoy teaching so much."

Classroom Impact

Respondents to the recent survey indicated that the Lilly program impacted their classroom work positively to a slightly greater extent than early respondents. Recent fellows said the program impacted them to a great or very great extent in the areas of collegial contacts (83%), commitment to teaching (75%), philosophy of teaching (75%), teaching skills (74%) and understanding of student learning (74%).

Open-ended comments in the latest survey indicate that the fellowship had a notably positive effect on student learning. In fact, one fellow wrote that the single most positive effect was "understanding how students learn." Another wrote, "I really try to touch all learners now." Fellows also were more clear about what they really wanted students to learn: "My philosophy of teaching changed from grading and evaluating to having students learn, and that set my priorities straight." Still another said, "I think a lot more about *why* I do things and *what* I want to accomplish in the classroom."

Many other comments stressed a new appreciation for involving students in their own learning through active and collaborative teaching approaches. One fellow said: "The Lilly program moved me to a more student-run classroom, even though it makes me less the 'star of the show.' That's great!" Another wrote, "The fellowship allowed me to be self-critical of my teaching methods and more aware of different approaches to engage students."

Comments also focused on the importance to the fellows of learning about teaching in community. One fellow wrote, "I felt that I was part of a community for the first time on this campus," and another said, "I was able to practice more fully and effectively my beliefs as a

teacher because of the great ideas of others and the support they offered to help me continue taking risks.”

One also gets the sense from these comments that the effects on the Lilly fellow’s classrooms are not only powerful, but long-lasting: “I think about teaching and how my courses could be better for my students almost constantly now.”

Effect on Professional Lives

Fellows also were asked to rate the effect of the Lilly Program more broadly on their professional lives. In the most recent survey, fellows noted the program’s “very positive” effect more often than their earlier counterparts on teaching ability (79%) and on credentials for tenure (62%). The sharpest increase appeared in the 62% (up from 32%) of respondents who said the program had a very positive effect on their knowledge of institutional issues.

Many of the more recent fellows wrote about increased teaching-related service through advising students; becoming resources on teaching issues for colleagues both in the University and in their respective professional associations; organizing and participating in teaching brown bags and workshops, and serving on teaching councils and committees. One fellow wrote: the fellowship “made me think about what I can bring to my department--how I can be the kind of advocate I wish to be for students.”

For many fellows, service went beyond departments to the University community, and the Lilly program seemed to enhance their membership in that community. One fellow wrote, “[The Lilly fellowship] integrated my relationship to the University. Conversations with fellows, with my mentor and with other faculty gave me opportunities to express and see anew what I care about and why and to see how that joins me to others at UMass.” Another wrote about “belonging to a community of scholars on campus interested in promoting and advancing the role of teaching.” One fellow summed up the Lilly program’s effect on her life by saying it “has made me a more complete academic.”

The new group of fellows, however, also indicates that the ever-present tension in balancing the demands of teaching and research continues. “Despite the release time, I was so focused on teaching my large class that I just put research aside,” one fellow wrote. “I do research over the summers.” While it was a significant challenge for many to integrate preparation for undergraduate teaching with specialized scholarship, 55% of the fellows did report that the fellowship year had some direct effect on their publication record, primarily through the course release that “afforded some extra time to focus on research.”

In open-ended comments, these fellows mentioned finding time to begin new research projects, to apply for grants and fellowships, to do collaborative research with other faculty, and to affirm the “interconnectedness” between research and teaching. One wrote: “I always sensed--rather than fully articulated--the way my research connected with my teaching. The Lilly year gave me a chance to work on both intensively and to integrate them productively. For me, that was vital.”

The Once and Future Lilly Program

The 10-year Lilly Teaching Fellows retrospective study ended with a number of recommendations to the CFT, including: refine the fellow selection process, move the retreat to fall semester and offer more guidance on the use of release time, formulating manageable projects and the mentoring relationship. As this article indicates, every one of those recommendations was implemented--and more.

The first report also suggested the CFT should continue to educate the campus about the Lilly program, and if interest in the fellowship is any measure, that goal too has been met. Many newer fellows were steered to the program by department chairs (some of whom now nominate candidates each year), former fellows and colleagues. "I had heard wonderful things about [the program]," one wrote. "I wanted to see if it was all true." Another wrote, "I had always heard that the Lilly Teaching Program was one of the 'jewels' on the UMass campus. Following a great year, I could not agree more." One fellow in the first survey called the CFT and its Lilly program "an oasis in a desert" of indifference to teaching.

The final recommendation in the first report was to add a Senior Lilly Fellows Program so that long-time faculty could have the same opportunities for learning, sharing and rejuvenating their teaching that their junior colleagues enjoy. Respondents to that first survey talked about "continuing the Lilly glow" and providing some remedy for what they called "Lilly withdrawal." The CFT in 2000 was awarded a two-year Hewlett Grant for the Improvement of General Education. Hewlett fellowships for 20 senior faculty—10 in each of two years—addressed that goal, at least for a time.

The sense of community to which so many fellows refer is perhaps the greatest achievement, in the end, of the UMass Lilly Teaching Fellows Program. Here are some comments to that effect from the latest survey:

- "I felt that I was part of a community for the first time on this campus."
- "I had an increased sense of a shared mission with other teachers in this University."
- "The most positive effect of this program has been the sense of belonging to a community of scholars on campus interested in promoting and advancing the role of teaching."
- "I feel that I have been integrated into a University community. I have made friends who energize me and who support me and who make me feel like part of something large and important on campus."

Sixteen years worth of former Lilly fellows, as well as fellows from the CFT's other teaching fellowships, now hold a bi-yearly "Looking Forward Together" conference to continue to tap into this collective energy and commitment to teaching of those who have benefited from these programs. "The Lilly is an exceptional program," one respondent wrote, "and for most of us, it becomes a life-long membership."

The fact that the director of the CFT and her small staff have made this magnitude of difference to dozens of fellows in the past sixteen years--who have then gone on to make untold difference in the lives of their colleagues and most especially their students--is nothing short of miraculous.

To ask more of such a program almost seems unfair in light of the evidence presented here that indicates its various components already are highly effective and that it continues to impact fellows' work in the classroom and their professional lives generally in significant and positive ways.

If one were to ask for more, however, information gleaned from the latest survey brings three thoughts to mind.

The first is that the Celebration of Teaching Dinner should not lose its focus, even as it attempts to highlight a range of teaching initiatives on campus. The challenge to make the dinner innovative no doubt will remain as the years pass, but its symbolic importance to former fellows and to all of those on campus who value teaching is its heart. A respondent to the first survey wrote, "[The dinner] reminds me every year of what I'm about." Another called it "one of the most wonderful nights of my professional life." And although the fellows' own expectations for their presentations at the dinner may inevitably ratchet up each year, they should be reminded that there is a simple eloquence to saying--simply--that teaching matters.

The second thought stems from a continuing theme in both surveys: support for the idea of a broad-based Senior Teaching Fellows Program. One fellow wrote, "[A senior fellows program] would help build community and renew commitment to our shared missions. Now is an auspicious moment for such renewal. . . With some junior faculty arriving--even though not enough of them--they need to see a re-energized senior faculty." Another said that her most significant realization during her Lilly year was that "becoming a good teacher is a lifelong effort." UMass would be wise--even in a time of budgetary crisis--to recognize that "lifelong effort" by allocating to the CFT the necessary resources to extend the life of the Hewlett senior faculty fellowship. It would be hard to overstate the benefits, not only to participants but to their colleagues and students. As faculties age (and students don't), a senior faculty fellowship could help tenured faculty stay alive and vibrant in the classroom.

Finally, the Center should continue its recent efforts to bring together outstanding faculty, not only to investigate issues of teaching and learning, but also to do so in ways that contribute to thought and practice in the disciplines. The notion of "classroom research" or "scholarship of teaching" has been implicit in the work of the Lilly fellowship, particularly in the course-based projects. In fact, a few fellows reported that the Lilly year had encouraged them to think and write about teaching innovations they had developed, which resulted in publications. A future goal might be to make opportunities for inquiries into classroom practice and student learning more explicit and supported in the program and more central and valued on campus.

These ideas might be food for thought as the Lilly Teaching Fellows Program prepares for its 17th year and moves toward the 20th anniversary of this "continuing conversation on teaching." The two central questions for the CFT, however, will remain the same:

When you've got a good thing going, how do you insure that it continues? Even better, how do you improve it?

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