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connect GRANTS 2015 Academic Year Proposal

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Project Title: Development of a Women in Liberal Arts Group

Executive Summary This proposal focuses on the next stage of organizational culture change for the College of Liberal Arts that has developed as an outgrowth of an *Appreciative Inquiry* process initiated two years ago. This next stage is to continue to enhance professional and leadership development among women faculty and to improve faculty satisfaction and work experience within the college. Using theory and principles associated with *Action Learning* and *Narrative and Collaborative Reflective Practice*, we seek resources to support the continued development of a network of COLA women faculty to support inclusiveness for women and people in gender minorities. Through regular meetings of interested participants, we anticipate forging new forms of productive personal and professional relationships between and among participants. We hope to establish co-constructed stronger communicative relationships, create ongoing dialogues, and expand the space within which success for women faculty will be possible. This has the potential to lead to: interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship, a common vision for enhancing the workplace for women in the college, a set of actions to facilitate the realization of that vision, development of policies and sharing of practices to address faculty concerns, creation of group learning and reflection opportunities, and overall increases in the quality of life for all faculty.

Project Description This proposal is submitted at a time that larger group discussions have been initiated to develop a *Women in Liberal Arts (WiLA)* group. These discussions, involving more than 20 women faculty, have been informed by the *Appreciative Inquiry* process initiated in 2014; by exploring other models at RIT, particularly the *Women in Science (WiSe)* program; and by a review of the literature related to *Action Learning, Narrative and Reflective Practice*. Discussions began in 2015 during a series of lunches for women faculty held by the COLA Dean's Office. The most recent discussion on March 11, 2016 revealed enthusiastic support for a WiLA group and the current Connect Grant proposal from 29 women faculty, COLA Dean James Winebrake, and Assistant Dean Babak Elahi.

In 2014, a group of women faculty with diverse backgrounds and experiences in the College of Liberal Arts received a *Connectivity Grant* to organize, plan and implement an *Appreciative Inquiry* process for the College of Liberal Arts. This process furthered the *AdvanceRIT* goals to enhance professional and leadership development among women in the college, expand representation of diverse faculty in leadership positions, and improve faculty satisfaction and work experience. The core team facilitated an *Appreciative Inquiry* process from April 2014 through the fall semester 2015. Approximately 30 women faculty participated in this process. The results of the process were presented in October 2015 at the Seneca Falls Dialogues Conference and a peer-reviewed article, co-authored by four *Appreciative Inquiry* participants, was published in the *Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal*.

Based upon the faculty-led Annual Assessments of the College of Liberal Arts and the 2013 COACHE survey results, the *Appreciative Inquiry* process sought to address three areas: *collaboration opportunities, interdisciplinarity* and *appreciation/recognition* through fostering leadership among women faculty. A significant lesson learned from the *Appreciative Inquiry* experience was the critical role of relationship building leading to community building and ultimately, potentially, to positive organizational culture change. This developed from the emphasis within the *Appreciative Inquiry* process on narrative inquiry and group framing of aspirations for the future of the college (Cockell & McArthur-Blair 2012).

We propose using the WiLA structure to create a series of ongoing dialogue events to encourage women faculty to share their stories and participate in the development of new networks among COLA women

faculty and faculty who identify as a gender minority (i.e. transgender, non-binary gender). These dialogues will be constructed around various themes or questions including: “How to do hard things in the context of the workplace,” “How to confront situations that discourage women’s success,” “How to self-promote in productive ways,” or “When I felt the most productive in my work.” Through reflection and group learning, the groups will develop proposals for actions, such as new policies or procedures that have the potential for enhancement of the working environment. *Appreciative Inquiry* reframing techniques will be used to formulate actions that arise out of the dialogue sessions. (Cockrell & McArthur-Blair 79).

These dialogues will be held in the context of monthly luncheon meetings open to all faculty interested in supporting women and gender minorities (including people with non-binary gender identity and men who support these goals). These sessions will be structured for small group dialogues, facilitated by those who have been trained in the *Appreciative Inquiry* process (the proposers).

Some stories or areas of common concern may emerge that cannot be resolved by the group dialogue/group learning process. For those areas we will invite subject-matter experts to hold interactive workshops during monthly luncheon events. The selection of these experts and events will be determined by the responses of the faculty involved in the preliminary CCWAS survey, the dialogue events, and the ongoing mini-assessments.

We will emphasize connectivity among all faculty through the development of a WiLA website. In discussions with the leadership of WiSe (Women in Science), we learned that disseminating, discussing, and sharing our goals should be central to our mission in the first year in order to prevent misunderstandings about the focus of the group or feelings of exclusion by other faculty. The purpose of the WiLA group is to ensure the inclusion of viewpoints and issues that are sometimes underrepresented, with the goal that all faculty will benefit. The website will also be a platform for sharing stories and capturing the dialogue responses to the stories and responses posed. Meeting reports will be posted for faculty who could not be present at the events. We can post opportunities for professional development. We will post opportunities for professional development and materials from subject matter workshops.

Implementation plan Two more meetings of interested faculty will be held prior to the end of the spring semester, AY2015/16. We will use these meetings to draft a mission statement for WiLA and administer the CCWAS survey (or a version of it). Survey results will reveal possible topics or themes for dialogue/collective reflection sessions to begin in August 2016.

Proposed timeline WiLA organization established Spring 2016; mission statement crafted; preliminary survey (CCWAS); Graduate student hired June 1, 2016 to work on assessment process with project team; Website developed – Summer 2016; Monthly luncheon/dialogue sessions launched in Fall 2016 Formulation of action steps –Fall 2016 - Spring 2017; Final project assessment – May 2018

Intended Outcomes Interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship; A common vision for enhancing the workplace for women in the college; a set of actions to facilitate the realization of the common vision; development of policies and sharing of practices to address faculty concerns; creation of group learning and reflection opportunities; overall increases in the quality of life for all faculty; a tool for keeping connected (WiLA website) and sharing all these outcomes

Evaluation plan Assessment will be incorporated into each dialogue/reflection session with the use of brief attitude surveys (including both ratings and qualitative feedback) about the issue of discussion and the usefulness of the event. These mini-assessments will serve two purposes: they will provide data about the efficacy of the events for the people involved, and promote ongoing self-assessment to identify ways to improve the process. The CCWAS survey identifies four dimensions that extend emergent issues from the COACHE survey, but particularly shines a spotlight on challenges facing women and gender-minority faculty. The four dimensions include: equality of access, support for work-life balance, freedom from gender bias, and supportiveness of leaders. Responses to the CCWAS guide selection of themes for the dialogue events, to ensure that topics are aligned with issues that challenge and engage faculty.

Intellectual Merit and Broader Impact

This proposal reflects well-documented research in the area of Appreciative Inquiry, Action Learning, Narrative, and Reflective Practice and has the potential to advance the understanding of culture change within higher education organizations, the power of narrative and collective reflection in achieving that change, and the potential for utilizing a version of “peer consultancy groups” as the methodology for realizing the change. Pre- and post-attitudinal surveys will be used to measure the effectiveness of the dialogue sessions. Further, dialogues will be captured for analysis and coded to determine story arcs, themes, and circumstances for further investigation and action. Gergen and Gergen (2006) have demonstrated that extended dialogue and the development of narratives can be very effective methodologies to promote positive organizational change. In addition to creating change, dialogues build “enthusiasm and commitment among the participants” (115). This was clearly the case among the Appreciative Inquiry participants in COLA. Bird (2007) documented the power of narratives and the influence of storytelling “as a sensemaking device for women” in a large organization during a time when the subject organization was undergoing significant organizational change (311). Yost et al., (2015) have further demonstrated the importance of sharing stories as a methodology for “shaping organizational life” (163). They observed that current research “explores how stories enable people to navigate projects, adapt to job transitions, reinvent themselves, and manage strategic change” (164). Yost et al. (2015) concluded that individuals conceptualize their work experiences in narrative form and noted that narrative theory provides a rich resource of structural and interpretive paradigms. These small group dialogues are similar to “peer consultancy groups” (Vince 2002, 71). Vince describes the value of these groups as creating “sites for interpersonal alliances, spaces in the organization where it is possible to say the things that organizational politics makes unsafe...It is necessary to have a legitimate organizational space where it is possible to speak the truth about experience” (71). Further, these groups contribute to “collective learning and the implementation of ideas in practice” (72). Reflection is key to these learning processes. Vince and Reynolds (2009) describe reflection as a collective process where learning from experiences is linked to understanding past action and to improvement in future action. Sturm (2006) has argued that “those on the front line of [higher education diversity initiatives] must figure out how to achieve inclusive institutions when the problems causing racial and gender under-participation are structural...” (249). Sturm further notes that the national ADVANCE program itself has succeeded by “cultivating new ‘communities of practice’ with common interests, experiences, or concerns, but whose members otherwise lack opportunity to connect. These communities create occasions for concerned women and men to meet, to share their experiences, develop effective strategies, learn from mistakes, and take action to address issues of common concern” (295).

References

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