READING RETREATS: FACULTY EFFORTS TO REVIVE THEIR READING PROGRAM

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Abstract

In the United States, education and particular Reading education has undergone serious scrutiny over the past twenty years. From the Nation at Risk (1983) publication to the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), reading educators, who work directly with pre-service teachers, have had to confront several important challenges including establishing high academic standards for all students, developing and enhancing teachers' knowledge of the latest and most effective educational practices and initiating systematic reform within the school system so that new curriculum frameworks are aligned to key state educational policy.

The following paper describes how faculty in a reading program at a large metropolitan university along the southeastern coast of the United States reflected on current practice and discovered a means of maintaining their professional integrity while at the same time using professional development opportunities to create a reading program which is current, dynamic and effectively able to prepare future teachers who thrive in an environment of change.

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For many years, reading education enjoyed great prominence in the United States; however, in the 1980s, reading programs and education in general faced increased scrutiny with the publication of A Nation at Risk (1983) which portrayed schools in serious decline. The publication aired concern about the inability of American schools to adequately prepare all children for educational success. The publication suggested that many of the least advantaged children had been ignored by education, and urged the public to demand that all children's educational opportunities are ensured (A Nation at Risk, 1983), The publication initiated a wave of reform in the United States and its spirit continues to be felt today as educators confront some of those same challenges (Fuhrman, 1993a, Smith and O'Day, 1991 and O'Day and Smith, 1993) including:

1. establishing high academic standards for all students,

2. challenging teachers' knowledge, practices and assumptions about subject matter knowledge, learning and teaching, and

3. initiating systematic reform within the school system so that new curriculum frameworks are aligned to key state educational policy.

Preservice teacher education programs introduced preservice teachers to more innovative methods of instruction and taught them to avoid didactic instruction which emphasized drill and practice instruction to passive learners. Preservice teachers learned how to help young learners actively construct their thinking as they interacted with ideas and with one another. The role of the teacher changed from someone who provided delivery of materials and supervising practice, to someone who guided and facilitated learning.

In 2001 the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) legislated standards-driven reform in the schools and most states scrambled to implement standards and assessments aligned to those standards. The field of reading education was not immune to this increased scrutiny and reading programs throughout the United States began to align their curriculum to state and federal requirements. New state standards and academic expectations set forth by several accrediting organizations such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) encouraged faculty to reevaluate their reading programs and curriculum, however many reading faculty were also resolute in their desire to remain committed to their professional responsibilities of preparing future teachers to effectively meet the literacy needs of all children while working within the educational changes mandated by the state and federal system.

Reading education faculty need to carefully evaluate and thoughtfully appraise educational changes as they seek to remain focused on program improvement. The following paper describes how faculty in a reading program at a large metropolitan university along the southeastern coast of the United States reflected on current practice and discovered a means of maintaining their professional integrity while at the same time using professional development opportunities to create a reading program which is current, dynamic and effectively able to prepare future teachers who thrive in an en-

vironment of change.

The challenge to educational institutions; however, is to put this policy into practice. In this particular university, reading educators sought to find the most effective way to introduce preservice teachers to the educational reforms within the reading and language arts program area. Politicians and voters frequently cast a critical eye at the efforts made by teachers to enact new educational policy and expect teachers to immediately embrace new policy and effect fundamental changes within classroom practice. The reality is that it is quite challenging for teachers to interpret these results without guided support from educational faculty who are able to facilitate teacher learning (Grant, 1998).

The reading faculty began to identify the educational policy changes within their state as well as any changes in the reading profession in an effort to help future teachers meet these new demands. One significant change within the state was to increase the number of hours in reading from 9 to 12. Instead of simply adding a three-hour course to meet the 12-hour mandate, the reading faculty decided to take the opportunity to restructure their undergraduate reading program and enhance the content of their Masters Degree in Reading Education. The Masters Degree in Reading Education, which had up to that point suffered from low enrollment and was placed on 'hold' with courses suspended, was revived and gradually began to experience a healthy student enrollment (NCATE report, 2007).

As these new state changes were in the final stages of completion at the college, the state Department of Education as well as

NCATE passed additional mandates for teacher education accreditation. Teacher education departments were encouraged to develop a Conceptual Framework that was to be integrated into all program courses. The conceptual framework provided students with an overview of the goals of the program as well as the expectations of all prospective students. The five key components of the Conceptual Framework are (1) the foundation consisting of knowledge, skills, and dispositions; (2) the graduates in the program; (3) diverse settings in which the graduates work and have influence; (4) reflective decision-making which underpins the choices' graduates make as they meet the need of students and clients in diverse settings; and (5) the interactions among knowledge, skills and dispositions as graduates engage in reflective decision-making (Conceptual Framework, 2007). Reflective decision-making is utilized in an informed, ethical, and capable manner in program development and evaluation, governance, identification and use of resources, and in faculty recruitment, selection, retention and promotion. Faculty and administrators in the College of Education are informed, ethical, and capable reflective decision-makers as they prepare professionals to practice in diverse settings and meet the strategic imperatives of the College. This framework also guides the student performance outcomes of the undergraduate and graduate programs (Institutional Report, 2007).

METHODS

Participants

"Reflection is integral to the concept of continuous improvement" is one of the belief statements in the College of Education Conceptual Framework. To encourage effective reflection, all faculty members needed to be engaged in conversations about how to improve current programs, and make them more accessible to students. In the past, programmatic discussions were made at the departmental level with very limited faculty input. This form of decision making was due in part to the logistical challenges of the university.

The College of Education employed twelve full-time reading faculty on four geographically diverse campuses, separated from one another by 120 miles of extremely busy interstate traffic. As a result, many faculty members participated in teleconferenced monthly departmental meetings that frequently suffered from technological glitches or face to face meetings where faculty often had to hurry off in various directions at the end of each meeting in order to meet their scheduled classes. These logistical challenges limited the opportunities for faculty to discuss reading matters in any depth.

New reading programmatic decisions required increased reading faculty input. To effectively implement these new programmatic demands and demonstrate continuous improvement, reading faculty realized that they would need considerable opportunities for uninterrupted time to reflect on change expectations as well as to refine current program offerings to reflect the latest research and literacy practices. With the extensive distances in mind, faculty realized that they needed to meet in a central location for an extended amount of time where they would be freed from outside interferences such as telephone calls and impromptu meetings and would have the opportunity to become more socially and professionally acquainted in a context where diverse discourse could be enjoyed and respected.

Reading Retreats

After some discussion, the reading faculty identified a central location which would be conducive to discussions on programmatic changes and decided to plan a two day reading retreat. Reading retreats have proven to be effective means to establish communicative efforts among the faculty and are associated with the concept of faculty learning communities (Hubball & Burt, 2004). Faculty-learning communities have been instrumental in establishing effective programmatic progress and change in areas such as content planning, assessment methods, and programming expectations. To be effective, learning communities must provide participants with an extensive opportunity to focus on complete whole and subgroup assignments through meaningful discussion and decision-making forums. Retreats must be designed so that teamwork as well as individual input are established (Cox, 2000; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Retreats must have a flexible, evolving framework for in-depth thinking and working sessions. One of the key factors in the success of retreats is a need for extensive time to accomplish

any necessary goals and objectives established by the participants (Baker, 1999; Gold, 1997; Wiles & Bondi 2002 and Hubball & Clarke 2004).

Participant learning and programmatic development must take place in an uninterrupted context away from daily interceptions such as other meetings, classes, research agendas, and phone calls. Change is a social action, political, and economic process that should involve individuals at various institutional levels (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002; Hubball, & Burt, 2004; Barab & Duffy 2000) to accomplish change and group commitment to such changes or program expansion, a multiple day commitment must be made. One way that reading faculty attempted to design their reading retreats was to hold retreats or faculty conferences where issues were discussed in a non-threatening culture with all in attendance feeling they can disagree and have equal partnership in the decision-making with everyone else, regardless of rank. It is essential that a collaborative experience rather than a top-down process be conducted so discussions can be open and that all expressed ideas be given value and thought. A shared understanding and development can lead to a shared commitment to decisions made (Green & Etheridge, 2001).

College administrators welcomed the reading faculties' initiatives and encouraged them to take an active role in coursework redesign; however, it was up to the faculty members to secure funding for these meetings. One reading professor had received a grant which helped to fund a series of reading retreats to encourage collaboration and communica-

tion among reading faculty members. The economic support enabled faculty to go off campus where they were able to work for two days on the new curricular demands. The reading retreat led to significant revisions of the current undergraduate reading-language arts program and prompted discussions concerning revisions in the graduate program. These specific accomplishments are detailed in the following sections of this manuscript.

The faculty used the retreats as an opportunity to focus on specific reading topics over a period of time. The retreats enabled faculty to explore new ideas and to express many perspectives with supportive reasoning while keeping in mind the goal of creating the most dynamic and valuable reading program for the students. These working conversations led to aligning course objectives and creating master syllabi for 14 undergraduate and graduate courses. Since the program employed over 40 adjuncts, these syllabi needed to be clear, specific and uniform. The reading faculty decided on critical assignments and accompanying rubrics for various courses and shared a variety of ways that faculty might accomplish such tasks. Reading retreats also permitted faculty to share instructional activities and materials which they used in their respective courses, syllabi expectations and schedules they found workable. The reading faculty also had an opportunity to discuss current research and its applicability to the program, students and the faculty members own professional development.

Over a two-year period, faculty participated in six retreats. The first four retreats were funded by the grant, but the last two retreats were paid by each faculty

member. During group debriefing which were conducted after each retreat, the faculty overwhelmingly expressed value in the retreats and believed that the retreats encouraged them to be more productive and engaged in programmatic development.

After the last of the six retreats, it was decided to ask each of the twelve full-time reading faculty to respond to five questions in an open-ended, free-response manner. The five questions were:

1. What value did you personally gain from the retreats?

2. What do you feel was the value of the retreats on graduate and undergraduate programs?

3. What might the foci be for future retreats?

4. What logistics should be considered for future retreats?

5. What advice do you have for faculty at other institutions on initiating retreats?

The twelve reading faculty responses were tabulated and examined for similarities and differences in their open-ended, "free" responses and what follows is the feedback expressed by the 12 reading retreat attendees.

Question 1, *What value did you gain personally from the retreats?* Seventy percent of the respondents focused on the productive and in-depth thinking to improve programs, building professional and personal relationships, and interaction with faculty from other campuses. Specifically, respondents commented on the quality dialogue and discussion time which took place during the retreats. Two of the newest faculty members both expressed that they felt they were part of

the group from the beginning and that their comments were valued by veteran professors. They also said that the retreats helped them become aware of the scope and expectations of both the undergraduate and graduate reading programs (see Figure 1). Their responses reinforced Green and Etheridge's (2001) contention that equal partnerships in collaborative decision-making must occur.

Question 2, What do you feel was the value of the retreats on graduate and undergraduate programs? Respondents again felt the strong sense of collegiality when it came to implementing changes to the undergraduate and graduate reading programs (see Figure 2). Faculty were in agreement on the changes made to align their program to state standards. Foremost; however, was the belief that these new changes to the courses would more effectively provide students with in depth knowledge of instructional practices and theories of literacy education. The faculty unanimously supported the opportunity to participate in extended discussions with each other. During the time faculty revisited the specific offerings of the undergraduate and graduate programs and came up with a sequence of reading courses that were more favorably aligned with state and federal education mandates.

Since 100% of the faculty had indicated during the various retreats that they wanted to continue with the retreats, Question 3, What might the foci be for future retreats, was used to help choose the most appropriate topics for future reading meetings? It also helped to ascertain the congruity of what they felt still needed to be accomplished. The three responses highest in agreement were to refine graduate program and recruit-

ment practices, update syllabi, determine text choices and course requirements, and decide on critical assignments for required courses (see Figure 3).

Question 4, What logistics should be considered for future retreats?, Respondents indicated that a meeting outside the confines of the university campuses was highly valued, as was the opportunity to socialize and participate in communal meals. Not surprisingly, respondents also supported the idea that retreats be supported through a departmental budget (see Figure 4).

The final question, What advice do you have for faculty at other institutions on initiating retreats? Reiterating their responses on Question 4, the faculty unanimously stressed that it is important to locate a place away from a campus which was secured through departmental funds. In addition, respondents also believed that effective retreats were organized by a strong, successful group facilitator who made certain that sufficient time was allotted for team and paired work (see Figure 5).

The reading faculty retreats have been a positive force for melding together the reading faculty. There is still work to do but the positive attitude and the personal giving of professional time suggests that reading retreats have been and are an ongoing success for both faculty and reading program growth. Progress already made, in part through the retreats, is highlighted in the following sections.

RESULTS

Reading Advances: Undergraduate

When the state requirement for 12 se-mester hours in literacy was mandated, the reading faculty decided to use this opportunity to restructure the reading component in the elementary education program. The previous literacy component had been targeted at Grades 1-6 since the state certification for elementary education had previously been designated 1-6. However, state certification changed from 1-6 to K-6. In addition, school districts in desperate need of middle school reading teachers were hiring 1-6 certified graduates who were not adequately prepared to teach middle school students. To address this issue, the reading faculty decided to extend the scope of the reading program to cover Birth-Grade 8.

The reading retreats provided the perfect opportunity for faculty to spend sufficient blocks of uninterrupted time to brainstorm various ideas for the reading courses. As chart paper increasingly covered the walls of the meeting room, themes eventually emerged, reading topics were clustered with those themes and themes were aligned to standards until eventually four literacy courses were created. Those four courses were sequenced and described as follows:

(1) Language Arts and Literature: Birth through Grade 8. This course focused on the methods and materials for teaching language arts skills and children's literature from birth through middle school.

(2) Reading Development 1: Birth through Grade 3. This course focused on emergent and beginning literacy development in children, birth through grade 3. Topics covered include: philosophy; factors affecting literacy success such as child characteristics, family, environment, cultural/eth-

nic diversity; literacy skills and concepts, assessment; evaluation; approaches, methods and materials using research based developmentally appropriate curriculum and practices. Field experience in a classroom setting is also required.

(3) Reading Development 2: Grades 3 through 8. This course concentrated on strategies and materials appropriate for literacy instruction in grades 3 through 8. Emphasis is placed on reading and integrating writing into teaching, narrative and non fiction genres. Utilizing reading to learn is the primary focus.

(4) Reading Diagnosis and Remediation: PreK through Grade 8. This course focused on the recognition and diagnosis of reading difficulties using a variety of assessment tools and on prescribing and implementing a variety of appropriate methods and materials to improve reading performance. Field experience in a classroom setting is required for this course.

Based on a recent climate survey (IPEP report, 2007) which was completed by administrators in the counties serviced by the university, comments related to the reading program suggested that area administrators felt very positively with first year teachers' performance in the classroom. These new teachers excel in their ability to communicate (orally and in writing) with parents and students, as well as their knowledge of literacy theory. Administrators did request that new teachers become exposed to a greater number of reading assessments which are used in the various counties. Reading professors are currently revisiting coursework for each of the four reading courses in the undergraduate reading sequence. Faculty will ensure that coursework

address school administrators' needs as well as align the coursework to the state's Educator Accomplished Practices, as well as NCATE standards, and will be required in all sections of the courses.

Reading Advances: Graduate

As noted earlier, the graduate reading program had been on hiatus for several years as enrollment diminished. The spotlight, again, is on reading education and the reactivation of the program has been a gargantuan task. Much progress has been made but the culmination of this progress can best be summarized in the latest endeavor of the reading faculty. The task was to decide on the sequence of courses and the faculty earlier decided to incorporate a student self-selected action research project throughout the program. During the last retreat, the faculty divided into teams of three to five faculty members and assumed membership into four separate groups. Their challenge was to develop a scope and sequence of courses and to integrate critical assignments and action research components into each course. Four groups were formed, ideas of each were shared, and a vote was taken. Four operative plans were put forth which are presented in Figure 6 and were voted by each full time faculty member on the four campuses.

As can be noted throughout the four plans, Action Research was viewed as an important component in the graduate program. Action research is defined as "any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about the ways that their particular schools oper-

ate, how they teach, and how well their students learn" (Mills, 2003, p.2). As reading faculty began thinking about enhancing the graduate program, the overriding expectation for the graduate program was that students become professional educators who were intimately involved in the research process to be a professional educator (Stenhouse as cited by Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005). The reading faculty selected the first graduate course, Developmental Reading to be the pilot class with action research as a focus in the students' graduate work. The instructor in the course carefully introduced students to action research by asking them to write journal entries reflecting on their experiences, observations, findings, and plans for future research. The journal entries were completed at the end of the day. After action research was introduced, students were instructed to explore the literature to determine a question or problem to investigate and then directed to narrow their action research questions as they worked in cooperative groups to brainstorm potential research questions, determine whether questions would be clustered, and to confirm that questions were researchable. The critical assignment for the students in this pilot class was to write and present a basic action research proposal, which the professor believed would allow students a holistic glimpse of what an action research thesis would involve. Provided with an outline to follow, a rubric for grading, and a choice of how they would share the proposal, students would be able to analyze and synthesize knowledge gained from class readings, discussions, guest speakers, and literature reviews into an action research proposal that could be enhanced in future classes. The learning process that took place paralleled the action research continuum outlined in Holly, Arhar, and Kasten (2005) as student's feelings of inadequacy and absence of self-efficacy changed to a perspective of authority and professionalism.

The final decision led the faculty to decide that students would develop a research agenda in the first course, begin a literature review in the second course, identify a methodology in the third course, complete the literature review in the fourth course which was the remediation course, and begin data collection and data analysis in the fifth course, and culminate with a poster session or other means to present findings as part of the sixth course, the Reading Practicum.

At this point in the continuum, the Reading Faculty is working to refine the graduate program so that it is more closely aligned with state and federal standards. Additionally, reading faculty are exploring way to help scaffold graduate students action research experiences by providing them with increased support and guidance in conducting action research in their classrooms or in other acceptable educational-related forums. This is only a small aspect of what the faculty has accomplished in terms of graduate reading education; but, it is a huge step of agreement and, because of time at the retreats, the faculty has had the opportunity to think and consider more deeply just how they perceive the graduate program and ways it can proceed forward and meet the needs of area teachers and their need to find "educational avenues" to meet more fully the literacy needs existent in their classrooms and/or the community.

SUMMARY

Even during times of increased external scrutiny and minimal support in reading education, reading faculty at this university continue to explore ways to enhance reading education and pedagogy for undergraduate and graduate students. In terms of professional literature recommendations, the reading faculty did become a learning community. Through effective use of retreats, blocks of time for in-depth discussions before decision-making occurred. The group planned multiple times to meet and began to see what they needed to accomplish as an evolving process (Baker, 1999, Gold, 1997, Wiles, & Bondi, 2002, Hubball, & Clarke, 2004). Teamwork in accomplishing set goals definitely occurred. (Hubball, & Burt, 2004, Cox, 2000, Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). An equal partnership environment did occur with new faculty feeling valued and empowered. The faculty also agreed on a shared commitment to the decisions made (Green, & Etheridge, (2001). Participants became members of a team who made critical decisions on a variety of topics including content, assessment, and programming group decisions. "Reading retreats", both funded and unfunded, provided opportunity for reading faculty to work collaboratively to provide additional "reading advances" in both undergraduate and graduate reading.

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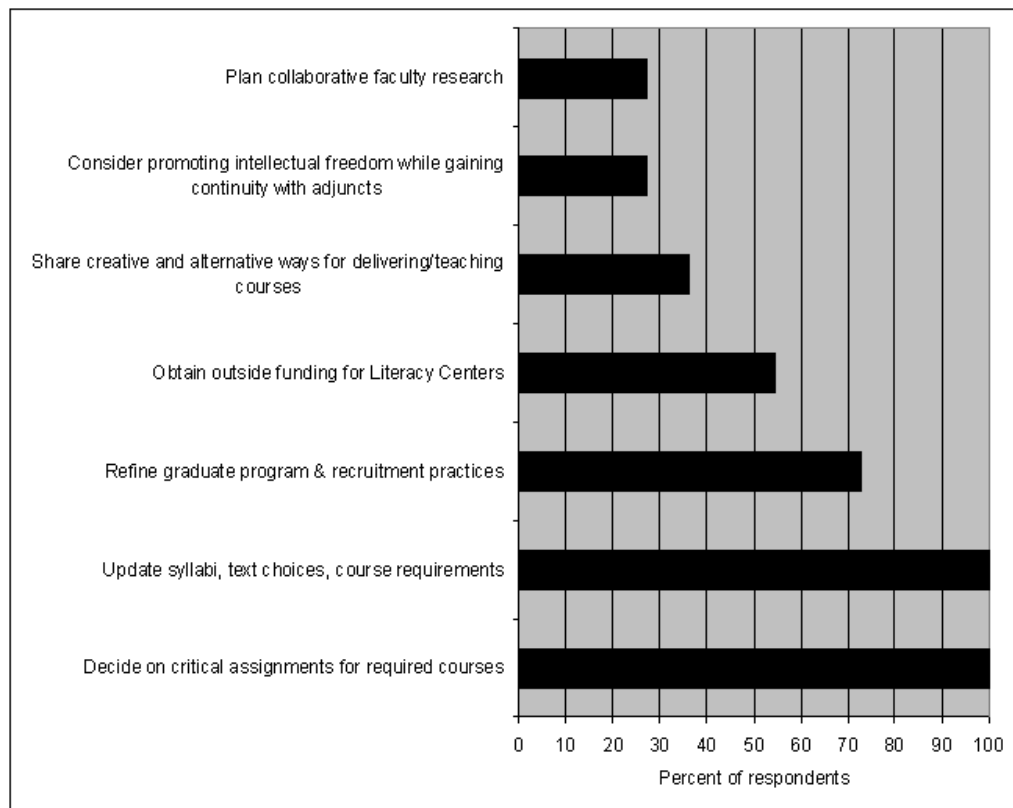
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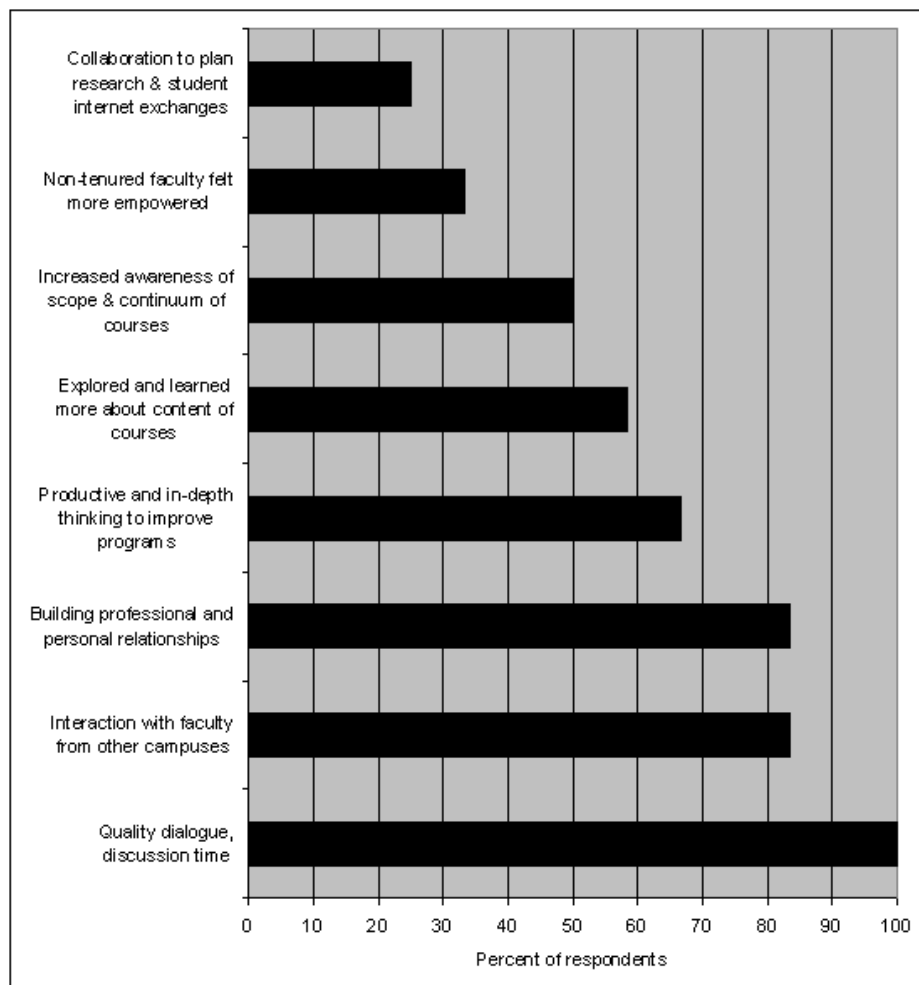
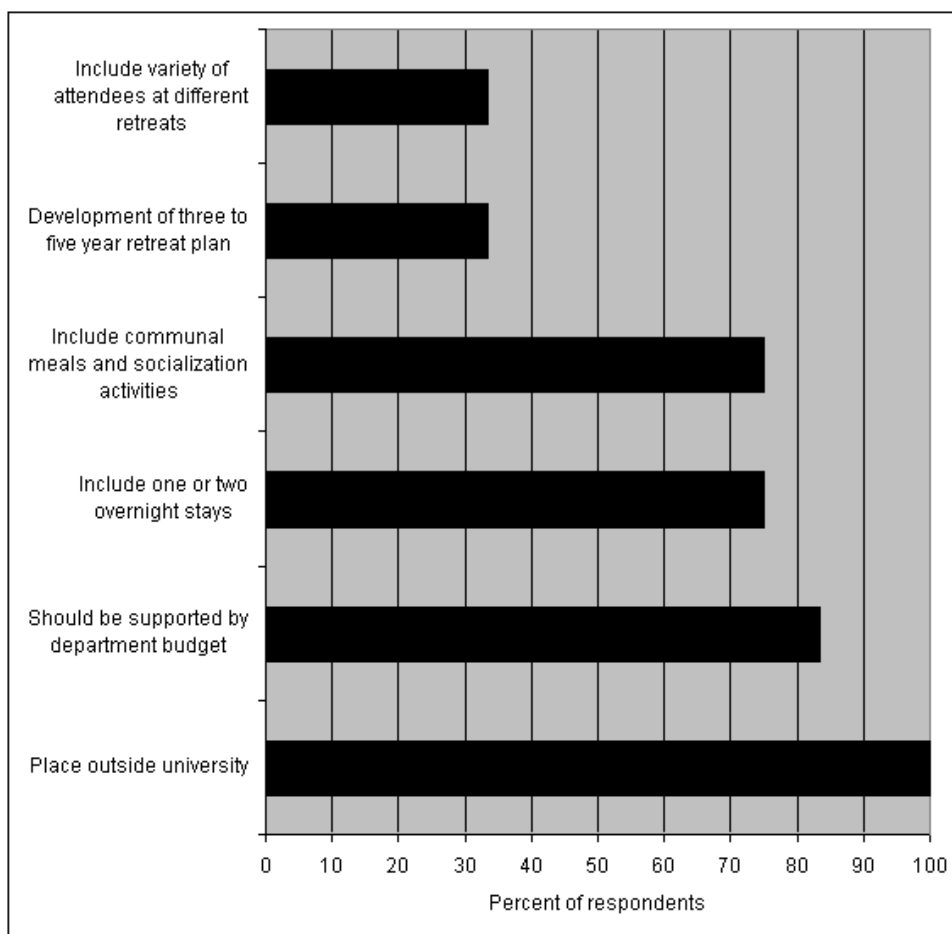**Figure 1. Personal value of retreats as reported by reading faculty members**
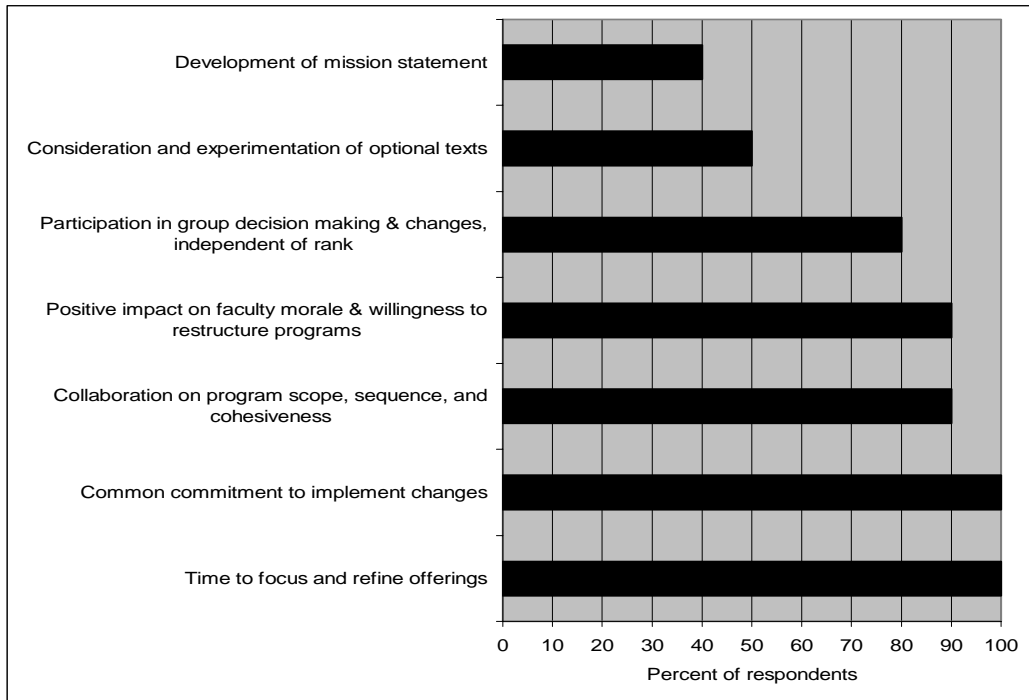
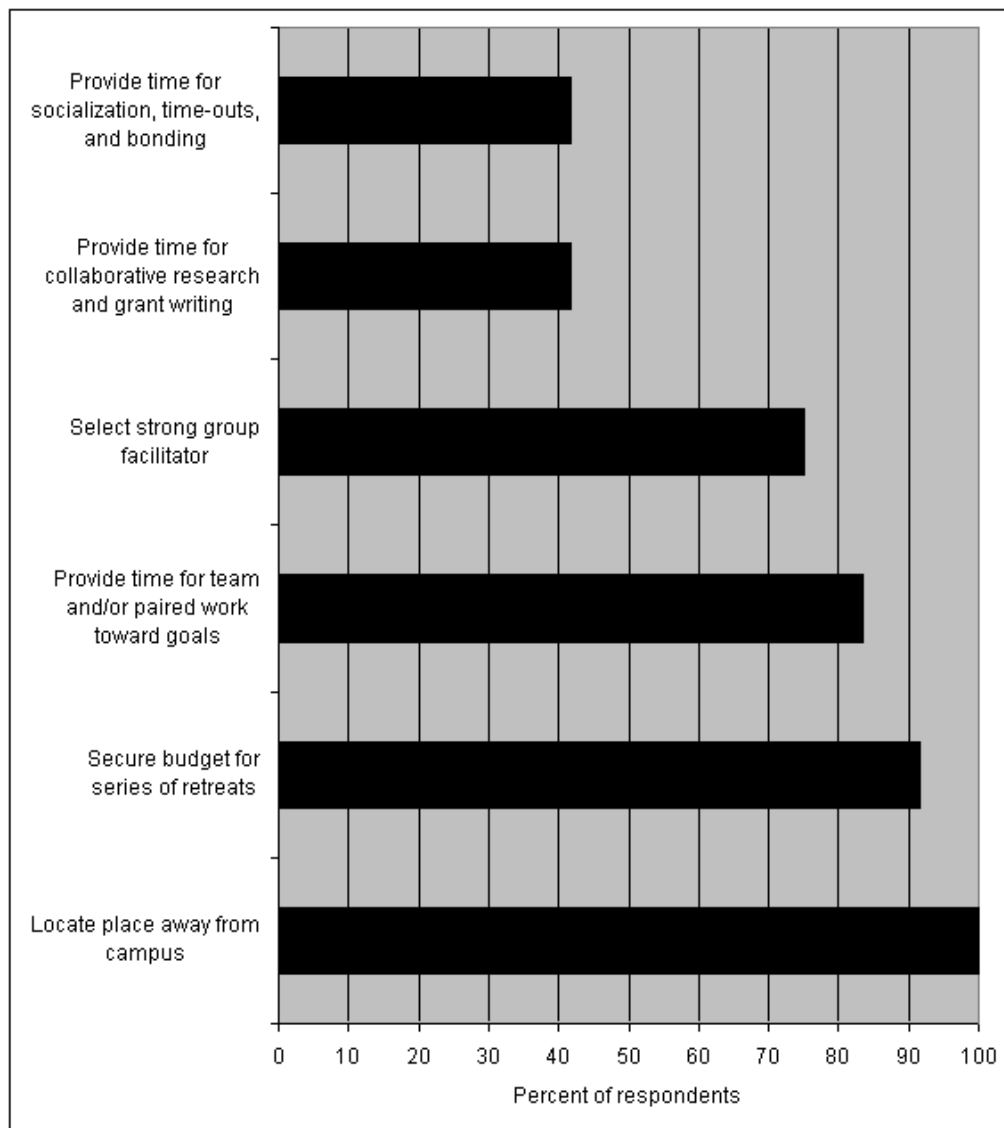**Figure 2. Value of retreats on graduate and undergraduate programs**

Figure 3. Foci for future retreats

Figure 4. Logistics to consider for future retreats

Figure 5. Advice for other institutions on initiating retreats

Reading Faculty,

I am enclosing the four Graduate Reading course and AR proposals (Groups 1-4).

Please indicate your Group preference. A majority vote on the item below will determine the Masters sequence and AR plan which we will implement in our program. Please read and respond by putting an **X** next to one of the Groups. Please respond to the vote by the last week of the semester.

1. _____ I support the implementation of Group 1 proposal

2. _____ I support the implementation of Group 2 proposal

3. _____ I support the implementation of Group 3 proposal

4. _____ I support the implementation of Group 4 proposal

Group 1	Group 2
6351 - Research Inter. Dev. Question 6656 - Literature Review 6546 - Method, Implement, Data Collection 6548 - Data Analysis 6361 - Data Interpretation 6836 - Presentation	6351 - Question and brainstorm trends and issues 6361 - Lit. Review and Brainstorm, trends & issues 6546 - Methodology and implementation 6548 - Data collection and analysis 6656 - Data analysis and report 6836 - Practicum with poster session only
Group 3	**Group 4**
6351 6361 - Question, exploration, begin lit review, overview 6546 - Diagnosis: (no research) 6548 - (remediation) finish lit review, synthesis of articles, design & implementation 6836 - Practicum 6656 - Poster session	6351 - Research Intro., Develop question 6361 - Begin Literature Review (these two are together, 6351 and 6361, because no prerequisite) *(Introduction to Action Research)* *Elective (co-req. with 6351 or 6361)* 6546- Diag. -Methodology 6548- Remedial-Finish Literature Review, Design, Data Collection 6656- Data Analysis. Report/Paper 6836- Presentation

Figure 6. Possible Graduate Program Configurations and Selection Process Greetings