

Those Indispensable Colleagues

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I've been especially appreciative of my colleagues this week and there are lots of reasons why.

- **My colleagues teach me.** As might be suspected, I mostly collaborate with folks who are interested in teaching and learning. They're good teachers and good teaching advocates who think about teaching in intellectually robust ways. They have ideas that are new to me and will often send me things they think I should read. I learn from their experience, their insights, and what they believe about teaching and learning.
- **My colleagues let me teach them.** They ask me questions, solicit my opinions, listen carefully, and have been known to do what I suggest. I work quite a bit with my colleagues on their writing. One of them has dubbed me the "lawn mower editor" and it's true I do cut a lot of prose close to the ground. Faculty who read about teaching and learning are busy. They don't have time for long sentences that meander their way to the point and then carefully qualify all of it. My colleagues take my tough editing. Most of the time they come back for more and they tell me their writing has improved. I think it has too, but then teachers are hardly objective about the feedback they provide.
- **My colleagues disagree with me.** They also agree, but it's the disagreements that are rich with learning potential. I appreciate that my colleagues call out my arguments that



aren't persuasive, point out when what I propose doesn't make sense, and just plain flat out tell me I'm wrong. Sometimes I am, but it's the process of finding out that's instructive and appreciated (usually after the fact, however).

- **My colleagues approach issues differently than I do.** I count as colleagues an accountant, an assortment of biologists and biochemists, a historian, two poly sci folks, a couple of engineers, several English profs, a social worker, a theology professor, some higher education PhDs, an instructional designer, and an ed psych numbers cruncher. It doesn't always make for easy communication (and I do have some colleagues from that field as well, which is my background). Sometimes what my colleagues tell me makes no sense at all until they provide explanations and answer questions that help me begin to see the shape of what they're seeing. We teach such different kinds of content in higher education and I think what we teach influences how we orient toward teaching and learning—something we haven't explored as much as we need to. Having colleagues in different fields is part of why I learn so much from them.
- **My colleagues support me.** The ones who know me best know when I need to hear that I'm wonderful, intellectually impressive, and a pedagogical powerhouse. They also know when I need someone to listen, ask questions, and suggest answers. Most tell me when I'm working too much and need to break for conversations about things other than the best pedagogical article I've read this week.
- **My colleagues care about me and I trust them.** I can share a half-baked, not-yet-well-formed, possibly stupid idea with one of my colleagues who will listen, maybe shake his or her head, but later email me that, after thinking about it and if considered a bit differently, my idea just might become a decent pedagogical insight. I let my colleagues read first drafts—stuff still forming in my mind, many miles from where it needs to be. They may think what I've written is junk (sometimes it is), but they're there with suggestions and encouragement to make it better.
- **My colleagues don't give up on teaching, learning, students, or their institutions.** I fight cynicism. I've worked on teaching and learning in higher education for almost five decades now and not all that much has changed. Research still trumps teaching at all sorts of places. Way too much teaching hovers right at or just below mediocrity. Students continue to give less than their best efforts and make poor decisions about their learning. My colleagues and I do complain at times, but I don't see any of us giving up. It's their commitment that gives me reason to carry on and on good days convinces me that things are getting better.

So, to my colleagues, a heartfelt thanks. And please be sure to thank yours—over coffee, in a text, with a handshake or hug. To teach on and to teach well, year after year, we need good colleagues.