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Virtual Faculty Learning Community Implementation Framework

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Virtual Faculty Learning Community Implementation Framework

by

The Rothwell Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University - Worldwide

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About the Authors

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Acknowledgements

V-FLC Implementation Framework Purpose

This framework is meant to be a useful guide for those interested in creating a V-FLC. You may skip around to the various sections or read the framework from start to finish. The framework consists of twelve questions to ask as you begin developing a V-FLC, answers to these questions based on our experience, as well as a visual representation of the framework.

Table of Content

I. Introduction

The demographic landscape of today's faculty is evolving to include more and more adjunct instructors with an increasing number working from a distance, possibly never visiting a university campus. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2015), nearly half of the faculty pool at higher education institutions are part-time instructors. Adjunct faculty may work remotely, rendering it improbable they will attend faculty professional development offerings. For part-time adjuncts who work on campus, they may not be involved in campus meetings or professional development opportunities due to work conflicts and schedules. This lack of professional development could result in compromised educational quality.

Faculty can benefit from participation in faculty-learning communities. A faculty learning community is a collaborative, community building experience to improve teaching and learning practice (Cox, 2001). A faculty learning community is a common strategy used to gather face-to-face faculty who share their ideas and teaching practices (Lewis & Rush, 2013); however, only a few virtual faculty learning communities have been established.

At the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University – Worldwide (ERAU-W), full-time faculty teach only a fraction of the course sections with the majority taught by adjunct instructors, who are globally dispersed. The Rothwell Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE-W) at ERAU-W provides professional development offerings for over 1,900 adjunct faculty located at the over 120 satellite campuses around the world through synchronous and asynchronous experiences. In response to the distinct needs of ERAU-W faculty members, CTLE-W created and offered an asynchronous Virtual Faculty Learning Community (V-FLC).

To begin this endeavor, campus deans and the Chief Academic Officer were briefed during the planning stages of our initial V-FLC. In addition, prior to recruiting participants for the V-FLC, the CTLE-W Director informed the deans, Chief Academic Officer, Vice Chancellor of Online Education, and Director of Online Faculty of the communication being sent for this new initiative. This gave campus leadership the opportunity to provide insight and voice any potential concerns. For example, we revised our initial email to clarify that the V-FLC would focus specifically on online teaching strategies our adjuncts could utilize versus making larger, wholesale changes to our online course templates or procedures.

II.   Virtual Faculty Learning Community (V-FLC) Implementation Framework
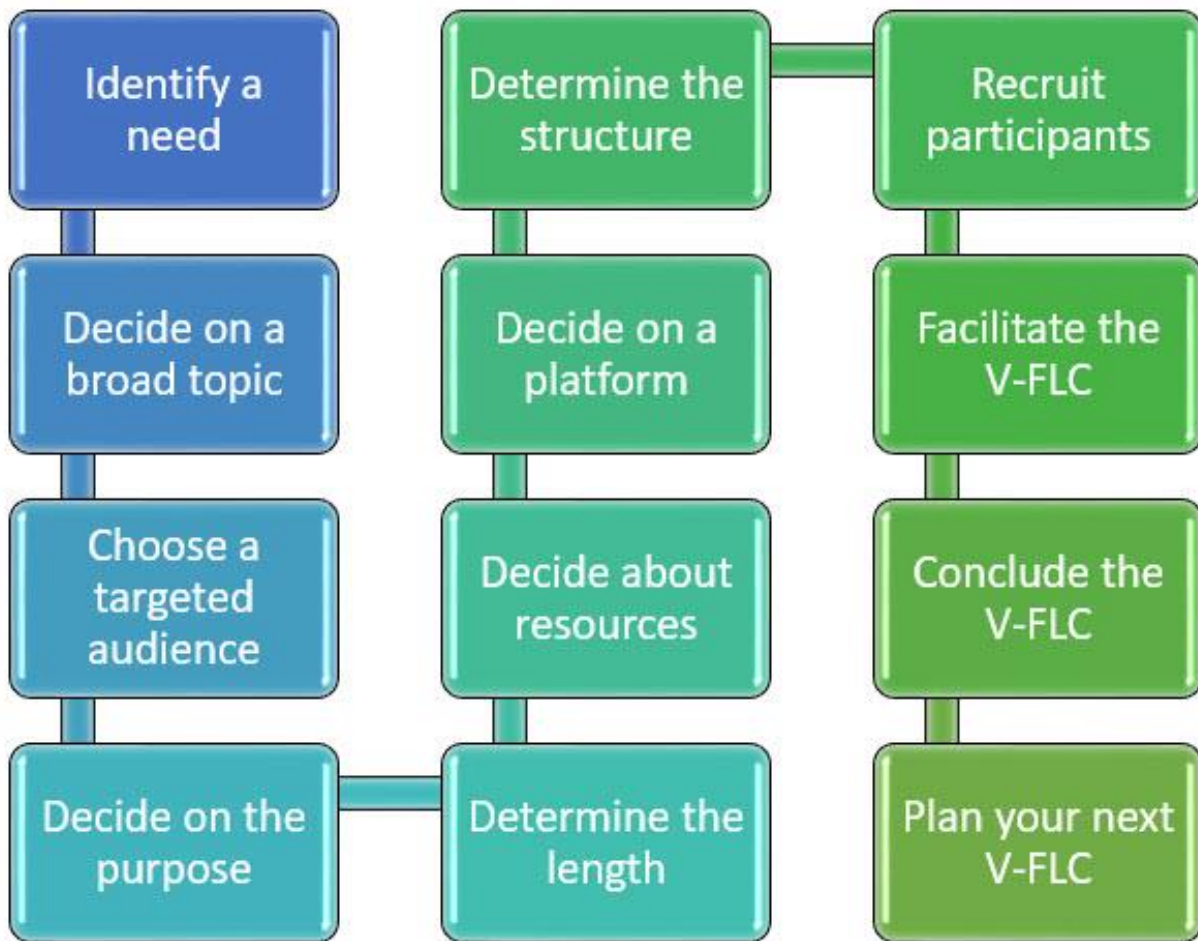
Implementation Framework Category Questions

1) **Identify a need**
   a. What need will this V-FLC address (professional development, community building, communication, etc.)?

2) **Decide on a broad topic**
   a. What topic will you focus on (online learning, feedback, mentorships, content specific, etc.)?

3) **Choose a targeted audience**
   a. Who will participate (adjuncts, online instructors, full-time faculty, new instructors, etc.)?
   b. What is your ideal number of participants?
   c. What will you do if the response is more or less than expected?

4) **Decide on the purpose**
   a. What are your objectives?
   b. Will this be a research project?

5) **Determine the length**
   a. Who will decide this?
   b. If you are deciding, how long will it be?
   c. If the participants are deciding the length, will you provide parameters and what will they be?

6) **Decide about resources**
   a. Will you have a budget?
   b. Will you provide resources/materials? If so, will the resources be used once or multiple times?
   c. What kind of materials will you use (books, videos, articles, all of the above)?
   d. Will participants identify resource(s)?

7) **Decide on a platform**
   a. How do you want the participants to interact?
      i. Will the experience be synchronous or asynchronous?
      ii. Will participants use videos, discussions, chat tools, small groups, etc.?
   b. Where do you want the participants to interact?
      i. Will you use your university's Learning Management System (LMS)?
      ii. Will you use an external tool (Yellowdig, Voicethread, etc.)?
      iii. Will you integrate an external tool within your LMS?
      iv. Will you use web conferencing (Blackboard Collaborate, Adobe Connect, Zoom, Skype, etc.)?

8) **Determine the structure**
   a. How will you define and/or explain a Virtual Faculty Learning Community to participants?
   b. How will you create a community?
      i. How will you build a community?
         1. Will you introduce yourself?
   c. How much structure will you provide?

   i. Will you state your expectations for participation?
    1. Will participants post discussions, share examples, create videos, etc.?
    2. How often will participants engage in the above activities (one topic per week or no due dates, etc.)?
   ii. Will participants develop their own guidelines?
    1. How often will participants contribute?
    2. Will participants select topics?
    3. Will participants select leaders for the V-FLC?
 d. Will you model engagement?
   i. How will you engage in the content, if at all? How so (videos, announcements, emails, feedback, contributions to discussions, etc.)?
 e. Will there be a deliverable?
   i. Will this deliverable be shared beyond the V-FLC?

9) Recruit participants
 a. How will you market the experience?
 b. Will there be incentives?
   i. If you have provided an incentive and a participant withdraws before the experience begins, how will you manage this?
 c. If it is a research project, how will you collect informed consent?

10) Facilitate the V-FLC
 a. Will you document your reflections during the V-FLC?
   i. If so, how?
 b. How will you handle withdraws or lack of participation during the experience?
 c. How much time will you budget to manage the V-FLC?

11) Conclude the V-FLC
 a. How will you acknowledge completion and participation?
   i. What evidence of completion will you provide for their professional development portfolio?
 b. How will participants communicate with each other beyond the V-FLC experience?
 c. How will you reflect on your overall experience?
 d. What will you collect and analyze from the V-FLC (artifacts, discussions, organizer reflection, etc.)?
 e. Will this experience be repeated?
   i. What areas of opportunities were identified at the conclusion of the V-FLC?
   ii. How will you make the necessary changes?
 f. Will you disseminate your findings?

12) Plan your next V-FLC
 a. What will you do next?

III.   The 2016-2017 ERAU-W V-FLC Implementation Framework Example

1) Identify a need

We identified two needs: (1) faculty development; and (2) sense of community. First, many of the faculty development offerings occur during the onboarding process before the faculty start teaching their first course with ERAU-W. While there are optional opportunities offered, we do not offer formalized professional development for veteran online adjunct faculty. Second, our online adjunct faculty are globally dispersed and may feel disconnected from the university community.

2) Decide on a broad topic

Based on our needs, for our first iteration, we focused on online teaching practices beyond what is covered in the initial faculty development courses.

3) Choose a targeted audience

We targeted online adjunct faculty members. This included veteran instructors and instructors new to online teaching at ERAU-W. We limited the selection to twelve members in one V-FLC group.

In our Fall 2016 groups, eighteen online adjunct faculty members expressed interest by the application deadline. Two additional online adjunct faculty members expressed interest after the application deadline. To accommodate the better-than-expected response, we offered two simultaneous experiences consisting of nine participants in each group.

In the spring of 2017, fourteen online adjunct faculty members expressed interest by the application deadline. However, at the start of the experience, eleven individuals were able to participate. As a result, one group was created.

4) Decide on the purpose

This project was both a faculty development experience and a research study. The purpose of the faculty development experience was to provide a collaborative space for online adjunct faculty members to lead discussions focusing on best practices for online teaching and learning. The research goal was to determine if participation in this V-FLC would increase sense of belonging amongst online adjunct faculty members.

The Professional and Organizational Development Network (POD) Early Researcher Grant funded this V-FLC project. The following objectives guided this study:

- Objective 1: Create Community of Practice for globally dispersed online adjunct faculty.

- Objective 2: Increase online adjunct faculty sense of belonging with the institution.

- Objective 3: Identify common issues experienced in an online teaching environment by newer online adjunct faculty

We named this experience a Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP).

5) Determine the length

Often, Faculty Learning Communities are one semester in length. For our purposes, the CTLE-W team decided the V-FLC would be eight weeks in length, which closely models our online terms.

6) Decide about resources

We used grant and department funds to purchase *The Online Teaching Survival Guide: Simple and Practical Pedagogical Tips* for each participant. Before the start of the V-FLC, this book was shipped to each participant for use during this experience and beyond. Participants were free to share their own resources in addition to the book provided.

7) Decide on a platform

This V-FLC was designed as an asynchronous experience where participants could discuss best practices in online teaching. Participants used various communication tools in our university's Learning Management System (LMS), Canvas. These tools included text discussions, videos, chat, and email.

8) Determine the structure

To define faculty learning communities, we provided links and resources in the LMS.

In the Fall 2016 groups, we created a welcome video in the introduction discussion as well as posted regular announcements in the LMS to address questions, prompt discussions, and motivate participants. We also created a bloopers video to humanize the experience. Personalized emails were also sent weekly to participants who lead a discussion thanking them for their contributions. In addition, we used email to encourage continued participation from those who expressed an interest in withdrawal. Lastly, a video outlining the deliverable was created and posted towards the end of the experience. In the Spring 2017 group, we created a welcome video and participated in the introduction discussion. Announcements were also used throughout the experience.

In both fall and spring groups, we provided expectations for participants, including how often they should sign on, what they should do when they sign on, and information about the deliverable (see Appendix A). We also included time commitment in the recruitment email (see Appendix B).

In the Fall 2016 groups, each participant was able to select a topic, create the discussion question, and lead the discussion for the week they chose. A virtual signup sheet was provided. Not every participant led a discussion. Also, in some weeks, there were more than one discussion. Discussions only lasted one week.

In the Spring 2017 group, faculty leaders were chosen by the participants during Week 1. These faculty leaders organized the discussion topics. Similar to the fall, participants selected a topic, created a discussion, and led the discussion. In contrast to the fall, these discussions spanned longer than one week. Throughout the Spring 2017 experience, faculty leaders continued to motivate participants to lead discussions by sending emails.

In the Fall 2016, we modeled the Week 1 content by posting the same discussion prompt in both groups. In the Spring 2017, we did not engage in the content discussions at all.

In both groups, participants were asked to submit a teaching tip at the end of the V-FLC. The format of this teaching tip was completely open. A compilation of these teaching tips has been shared on the CTLE Resource site (see Appendix C).

9) Recruit participants

We sent a targeted email to all online adjunct instructors. This email included expectations, timeline, and the informed consent which needed to be completed per IRB guidelines (see Appendix B).

In both groups, we used the aforementioned book as an incentive for participation.

After the Spring 2017 participants were selected and after the books were shipped, a participant withdrew. We requested that the book be returned, and the participant complied.

This was a grant-funded research project. Informed Consent was collected via email during the recruitment process.

10) Facilitate the V-FLC

In the Fall of 2016, two groups were run simultaneously. Weekly meetings were held with the CTLE-W stakeholders to discuss the experience. Also, we documented reflections and activities by contributing to a shared document. Throughout this reflection process, we identified several areas of opportunity that were immediately addressed. For example, we created additional discussion forums to include the peer review teaching tip and added another for closing remarks and reflections. In the Spring 2017, we also kept a document, including activities and reflections.

In the Fall of 2016, we had a number of participants request to withdraw at various stages of the experience. In response, we developed an exit plan to include four distinct faculty withdrawal scenarios.

Scenario 1: Faculty has requested to withdraw and has yet to contribute.

Sample Email: This is not a course and so there are no specific requirements. You can check in whenever you want, or you have the choice to be completely removed from this VCoP. Please let me know which one you prefer.

Scenario 2: Faculty has requested to withdraw and has committed to lead a discussion in a week where more than one discussion is scheduled.

Sample Email: This is not a course, and there are no specific requirements. You will remain active in the group in case you decide to check in or look at what your peers are saying. You also have the choice to be completely removed from this VCoP. Please let me know which you prefer. Your discussion is scheduled for Week X in the VCoP Topic Schedule. However, there is a separate discussion scheduled for that week. You can continue to lead your discussion as scheduled or be removed. Please let me know which one you prefer.

Scenario 3: Faculty has requested to withdraw, has signed up for a discussion and is the only leader for that week.

Sample Email: This is not a course, and there are no specific requirements. Keep in mind that you are scheduled to lead a discussion during Week X, according to the VCoP Topic Schedule. Please consider continuing this commitment so that your peers can stay engaged. You also have the choice to be completely removed from this VCoP. If you wish to continue with this experience, please post your discussion prompt at least three days before the week begins. Please let me know which one you prefer.

Scenario 4: Faculty has requested to withdraw, has posted a discussion, and will leave the group before leading that discussion.

Sample Email: This is not a course, and there are no specific requirements. Keep in mind that you have posted a discussion. Please consider continuing this commitment with ongoing facilitation throughout your scheduled week, so that your peers can stay engaged. You also have the choice to be completely removed from this VCoP. Please let me know which one you prefer.

Despite our best efforts, we experienced three withdrawals in one group. However, we were able to encourage

In the Fall of 2016, we did not anticipate the amount of time required to develop and manage this experience. Meetings were held weekly for approximately one hour for four months. In addition, time was spent answering emails, creating videos, recruiting participants, marketing, purchasing materials, organizing the LMS, contributing, and developing documentation. However, specific total time spent on these duties were not recorded.

11) Conclude the V-FLC

Throughout the V-FLC, our participants expressed interest in collaborating beyond the eight-week experience. Our CTLE-W utilizes a virtual resource center in Canvas, the LMS platform. At the conclusion of the Fall 2016 V-FLC, we created a special group page within this virtual resource center for completers. Completers were participants who submitted a teaching tip. We did not regularly monitor this group page. In this group page, former V-FLC participants from all groups are free to discuss, email, and/or share resources regarding any topic they choose. Completers also received a personalized certificate of completion signed by a campus administrator and members of the CTLE-W team for their professional development portfolio.

At the conclusion of the Fall 2016 V-FLC, we met to reflect upon the experience as well as reviewed the teaching tips, and survey responses. At this time, we began to outline the Spring 2017 V-FLC.

In Spring 2017, we implemented changes based on our reflections from the fall. We left the structure more open. Participants chose faculty leaders and created their own schedule. We did not include the discussions in the modules. Because we did not link the discussions to the modules, participants did not have to complete the pre-survey in order to access the discussions. We contacted participants who did not complete the surveys. Consequently, one participant never completed the pre-survey. In addition, we defined the CTLE-W role by changing the term "facilitator" to "organizer". We clarified that organizers would not engage or lead discussions. We also solicited faculty leaders' reflections at the end of the experience.

However, we were bound by a research grant and IRB, so we were unable to change a number of V-FLC components. For example, the pre/post survey needed clarification and we were unable to do so because the grant period included both fall and spring. Also, the LMS was not an ideal platform in that instructors likened this experience to a faculty development course, which impacted their behavior. Furthermore, the teaching tips submitted were not what we had envisioned. However, because of the grant and IRB, we were required to share them on our CTLE Resource Site. This was achieved by creating a compilation infographic.

Artifacts (emails, teaching tips, discussions), our reflections, and survey data were collected and reviewed throughout the project. Upon completion of both iterations, the data was analyzed. We created this framework to share our story and provide an opportunity for others to improve upon what we have done. We will also present at various conferences and publish in scholarly journals.

12) Plan your next V-FLC

We identified, applied, and received an additional POD grant funding opportunity to expand our current V-FLC. We will continue to update and expand our V-FLC offering.

IV. Lessons Learned

Throughout this process, the facilitators and researchers kept a journal to reflect on our experiences. The team met every week to discuss issues, challenges, successes, and future plans. In Fall 2016, there were two facilitators and one researcher who contributed to the same document. In Spring 2017, one facilitator and one researcher contributed to the same document; however, we did gather feedback and reflections from the two faculty leaders.

After the fall, we looked at some of the trends. This reflection impacted the development of the Spring 2017 Virtual Faulty Learning Community (V-FLC). Below are some lessons learned from this process.

In Fall 2016, the participants routinely referred to the V-FLC as a course.

> In Spring 2017, participants also referred to the V-FLC as a course. The CTLE-W team is exploring other platforms to encourage engagement without a course-based atmosphere.

In Fall 2016, the CTLE-W team were referred to as facilitators. The participants expected the CTLE-W team to function as instructors.

> Spring 2017, changed our titles to "organizer" and the group chose faculty leaders who facilitated the discussions. For future offerings, we are moving to a different model, which does not require faculty leaders.

In Fall 2016, there was a sign-up to choose weekly topics. This was difficult to manage. Some faculty did not contribute, some faculty dropped out, and some faculty choose two topics.

> Spring 2017, there were no weekly topics. This was well managed. The conversations were very deep, and they lasted longer than a week.

In Fall 2016, faculty had to create their own discussions but could not post them because they were "students" in the LMS. Facilitators had to move the discussion to the module for the faculty.

> Spring 2017, there were no modules, so this problem did not occur. This was successful. Most discussions were kept open for the duration of the experience. This happened naturally and will include this in future guidance.

In Fall 2016, we added a peer review discussion at the request of the participants. Additionally, we added a matrix for participants to share resources. The matrix was not utilized. These additions occurred after the V-FLC began.

> Spring 2017, the participants added various resources in the discussions.

In Fall 2016, the participants requested a Final Thoughts discussion. We received valuable feedback about the V-FLC structure and the CTLE-W team involvement.

> Spring 2017, we kept that discussion board.

In Fall 2016, we found that recruitment and retention was difficult. Some faculty dropped out a few weeks into the session.

Spring 2017, there were no issues or drops. The organizer requested that the faculty leaders reach out to people who did not participate regularly.

In Fall 2016, one of the groups' contributions significantly decreased around Thanksgiving. It is important to consider the calendar (holiday, semester start and end dates).

In Fall 2016 and Spring 2017, the teaching tips were inconsistent in quality. Faculty were told these would be shared in the CTLE Resource Site.

In future iterations, a submission will be required. However, the CTLE-W team will decide how to share them. For instance, the CTLE-W team created an infographic to share fall and spring teaching tips.

In Fall 2016, participants stated a few times that they wanted to continue the conversation beyond the experience. In response, we created a private Canvas group for all participants to continue interacting with each other.

V. Future Plans

Our CTLE-W team was awarded a 2017-2018 POD Network Research Grant to continue our V-FLC. This next iteration will be open to all faculty (full time and adjunct) teaching in all modalities (online, blended, face-to-face). We will implement the lessons learned from the Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 groups. Representatives will present this framework at the 2017 POD Network Conference as well as publish it on our CTLE website. Articles will be submitted to scholarly journals to include our research findings. At the end of the next 2017-2018 V-FLC, we will update the framework with additional information.

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VII.   Resources

Appendix A – V-FLC Expectations

Definition: Our Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP) is a group of adjunct online instructors from all three colleges at ERAU-W collaborating and sharing their teaching practices.

For more information on communities of practice and faculty learning communities, please review What is a Faculty Learning Community?

Facilitator Expectations: Your VCoP facilitator will lead the first week's discussion and model best practices. The facilitator will be available for general questions, such as Canvas technical support, expectations, and/or project deliverable.

Participant Expectations: Each participant will be responsible for selecting a topic from the book. Then, you will create, post, and lead a discussion forum throughout the week. There are nine participants and six open weeks, which means several weeks will have more than one discussion leader. This is completely led by you - you can choose to partner up or have two topics in one week.

Feel free to use any and all of the interactive Canvas tools, such as audio, video, and chat, to enhance your experience.

We've designed a schedule table to help you organize your topics. Please review the VCoP Topic Schedule to sign up. Aim to give your colleagues the proposed discussion question and readings at least three days before your week begins.

Feel free to use the Collective Best Practice wiki page to keep track of your favorite best practices.

As a reminder, you should expect to spend approximately five hours per week reading and participating in the asynchronous discussions about online teaching.

Teaching Tip Project: By the end of this VCoP experience, each participant will create and share a teaching tip. This can be done as a group or individually. The format and content is self-directed. This final project will be shared on the CTLE Resource Site. Please indicate if you would like your project to be anonymous or not at the time of submission.

This VCoP is meant to be informal and informational. So have fun! :)

Appendix B – Participant Recruitment Letter

Worldwide Adjunct Online Faculty,

The Rothwell Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE) has an exciting opportunity exclusively for online adjunct faculty. Do you want to collaborate with other faculty members around the world? Would you like to reflect on your online teaching skills? Are you looking for some new resources to improve student engagement? CTLE-W is offering the chance to participate in a Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP) focused on improving online teaching. This VCoP is funded through a Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network Grant awarded to your CTLE-W.

This VCoP will run 8 weeks (beginning April 10th and ending June 4th). All participants in this VCoP will receive *The Online Teaching Survival Guide: Simple and Practical Pedagogical Tips.* All interested participants must agree to log in at least 3 times a week. Participants will also create a Teaching Tip to be shared on the CTLE Resource Site at the end of the VCoP.

This VCoP will be limited to 12 participants. If more than 12 people are interested in participating, then CTLE-W will utilize a random selection process to determine the participants. Participation is completely voluntary. Whether or not you participate in this VCoP will have no effect on your relationship with Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. You do not have to respond if you are not interested in participating.

If you have any questions about this VCoP, feel free to reach out to Cristina Cottom at cristina.cottom@erau.edu. If you are interested in participating in this study please review and complete the attached application form and email it back to Cristina Cottom, Research Specialist, at cristina.cottom@erau.edu. All applications must be received by **April 2, 2017.**

We look forward to receiving your application.

Sincerely,
Your Rothwell CTLE

Appendix C - Teaching Tip Infographic