

Felicia's Apathy

by Gregory M. Stoup

Felicia is an adjunct economics professor starting her fourth term at the Cañada College. Although she has been employed by the college for nearly two years, she hasn't made too many connections with people outside her department. She recognizes the faces of several faculty from outside her division and a few in the Learning Center and Library. She's friendly with the staff at the coffee kiosk but usually eats her lunch alone hovering over her lesson plan. Felicia has been inside only three buildings on the campus outside of her classroom building and always parks in lot #2.

She likes the college environment well enough, but doesn't spend much time on campus that's not devoted to teaching and classroom preparation. She has a general understanding of most of the state, district and college policies that impact her classroom (mostly from what she retained from orientation and a handful of conversations with her dean and colleagues).

Felicia is aware of some of the work done by the Academic Senate & Curriculum Committee, but hasn't engaged either of those planning bodies for lack of time and some nervousness about her participation. She's not sure she'd know anyone there and might feel out of place in that setting; Felicia is a little shy. She has no understanding of the college's planning structure and has never heard of the College Planning Council.

The problem is Felicia has a great idea. She doesn't know it's a great idea and isn't sure how to implement it;- but she has it. And to her it's little more than an interesting observation.

Felicia has been quietly noticing that her student's performance in the ninth week of class, associated with a particularly nuanced element of subject matter, might be related to a very specific set of algebra skills. Casually polling her students on their math background, she identifies a pattern that seems to confirm at least part of her suspicion that math exposure has a relationship to performance on this particular subject matter.

Felicia took a handful of math courses in college and suspects that an understanding of one isolated component of algebra knowledge might be sufficient to adequately prepare students for the ninth week of her econ course. In her mind (and her intuition is correct) this algebra material is something that students could be taught effectively in one week of training.

Felicia has observed a pattern and formulated a hypothesis.

To take the next step, however, Felicia will need to venture into the unknown. Felicia feels she's a competent teacher and is proud of her young career, but she doesn't see herself as a leader – and for her, venturing into the unknown is reserved for the ambitious (or at least those more ambitious than her).

She toys with several ideas on how to propose a rough sketch of a math prep program to take to her dean, even gently bounces the idea off one or two of her division colleagues. But the idea never moves beyond a few casual conversations.

She considers approaching some math faculty with the idea, but it was too easy to convince herself that the concept was too raw and that she would need to iron out all the details before she could approach a math expert; but she never does.

Beyond having to work through her shyness and self-doubt, Felicia is facing a landscape she doesn't fully understand and imagines hurdles and roadblocks everywhere – even ones that don't exist. She is stuck.

Felicia's idea is lost.

Felicia is very devoted to her profession and doesn't let go of her classroom observation. She goes on to make several (rather innovative) adjustments to her pedagogy that yield noteworthy improvements in student performance. Yet no one is made aware of these small classroom innovations. Felicia quietly goes about the task of teaching and, in near anonymity, develops a track record consistent with that of a committed and talented college teacher.

What makes this scenario even more heartbreaking is that, unknown to Felicia, there is a very creative student services program director three building away that has an existing program model he could easily adapt to meet her needs – and even knows of a funding source that could underwrite a pilot program. Felicia was also unaware that a colleague in another division had recently attended a conference that highlighted a research finding confirming her classroom observations. All the support, resources and validation Felicia needed was but a few offices away.

The next term Felicia continued to teach her economic course at the college, albeit with a little less energy, a little less enthusiasm, and feeling a little more isolated. Cañada College moved forward as it always has, never aware of the lost opportunity.

Some question/comments to consider:

- Within this fictional framework, was the college complicit in the failure to identify the lost opportunity? Was the College Planning Council?
- What roles should the college and College Planning Council play in preventing these little tragedies? As you consider this question, avoid vague concepts like “do a better job at reaching out to faculty.” Think about specific actions, specific positions and specific points of intervention. Who needs to do what, where, when and how?
- Working together, can we build a planning system that empowers all the Felicia's on our campus - whether they be faculty, staff, administration or student - with procedures that not only nurture their ideas, but actually makes it difficult for good ideas to wallow in isolation? What would characterize that environment?

- Imagine a campus where these hidden ideas are routinely brought to light and nurtured into novel interventions and innovative programs. How would your weekly routine be different from what it is now?