On the Road Again—Destination: Music City

By: Cindy Kline

Vanderbilt, a private, major research university sits just blocks away from the top recording studios in Nashville. With 6000 graduate and professional students (another 6000 undergrads) and 1000+ full-time faculty, Vanderbilt is known in academe for the reputation of their research and their Center for Teaching.

Danyelle Moore, Paul Vermette, and I toured the Center for Teaching (CFT) facility, discussed programs, attended workshops and met with renowned faculty, finding there is great alignment between our respective practices.

Vanderbilt’s focus is different than that of Niagara due only to its size and prominence as a major research institution. With a large doctoral population (of which a vast number are engaged in teaching research), Vanderbilt has a sizable pool of developing talent around which their major CFT programs are based.

Dr. John M. Braxton, Professor of Education, centers his research on the college student experience and the sociology of the academic profession, which connected beautifully with our efforts to further the understanding and presence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) at Niagara. His insights gave new dimension to the 4 aspects of SoTL that we have come to recognize, (a) to ask meaningful questions which someone else will be able to use, (b) to analyze evidence in a systematic process, (c) to publish results, so efforts can be replicated, and (d) that efforts are targeted to improve teaching and therefore, student learning. Dr. Braxton was very interested in our practices here at Niagara.

Nancy Chick, Assistant CFT Director shared an interesting clarification pertinent to scholarship. Often professors have difficulty defining when their teaching work qualifies as “scholarship” vs. “scholarly.” Nancy clarified; bringing theory into practice is a “scholarly” thing to do, whereas publishing about the experience, is the “scholarship” piece. You may find her guide to SoTL on the NU Instructional Support website under resources. It’s worth the read.

The programs the CFT offers parallel many offered here through CASTL including Working Groups (our Faculty Learning Communities) where small cohorts of faculty meet regularly to investigate quality teaching; Conversations on Teaching (ours named TLC’s) where a less formal approach offers a similar experience; Small Group Analysis (our SGID), where instructional support specialists interview classes at the request of their Instructor, to ascertain the “bests” and the “opportunities”; in addition to technology consultations and assistance with syllabus and course design.

All in all, visiting the CFT was informative yet more so, reassuring. The CASTL initiatives here at Niagara are on par with those of a preeminent research university...so come see us...or visit the Instructional Support website at http://www.niagara.edu/is/. We’re worth the visit.
We wish to extend our sincere thanks to Derek Bruff, Nancy Chick, Rhett McDaniel and Tracy Tveit of the Vanderbilt University CFT and Dr. John Braxton for their time, and incredible hospitality. So, until next issue.... “On the road again”... I can’t wait to get on the road again...