

# Making Connections: How a Small Learning and Teaching Center Has a Big Impact

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## Abstract

Carleton College’s Perlman Center for Learning and Teaching (LTC) is staffed by a faculty member with a 60% appointment in the center and one half-time administrator, and is less of a “center” and more of a “connector.” This relatively small office is able to have a large impact not by developing extensive programming on its own, but rather by fostering collaboration and communication among individuals, programs, and institutional initiatives and developing programming in coordination with other efforts. In a culture that promotes grassroots efforts, faculty and staff continually work towards improving teaching practices at a variety of scales, from individual courses to department initiatives, collaborative grant-funded initiatives, and institutional changes. The LTC provides connectivity between these various efforts by providing a venue for staff, faculty, and administrators to showcase and reflect on efforts and ideas together, while also planning for new directions. Talks, workshops, book groups, and working groups often lead to follow-on projects and new collaborations, ultimately leading to a more inclusive learning environment for students.

## Culture of Teaching & Learning

As a residential liberal arts college with a traditional aged student body, student success, during college and in post-graduate endeavors, is the central tenet of Carleton’s learning and teaching efforts. Figure 1 puts student success at the center of everything we do.

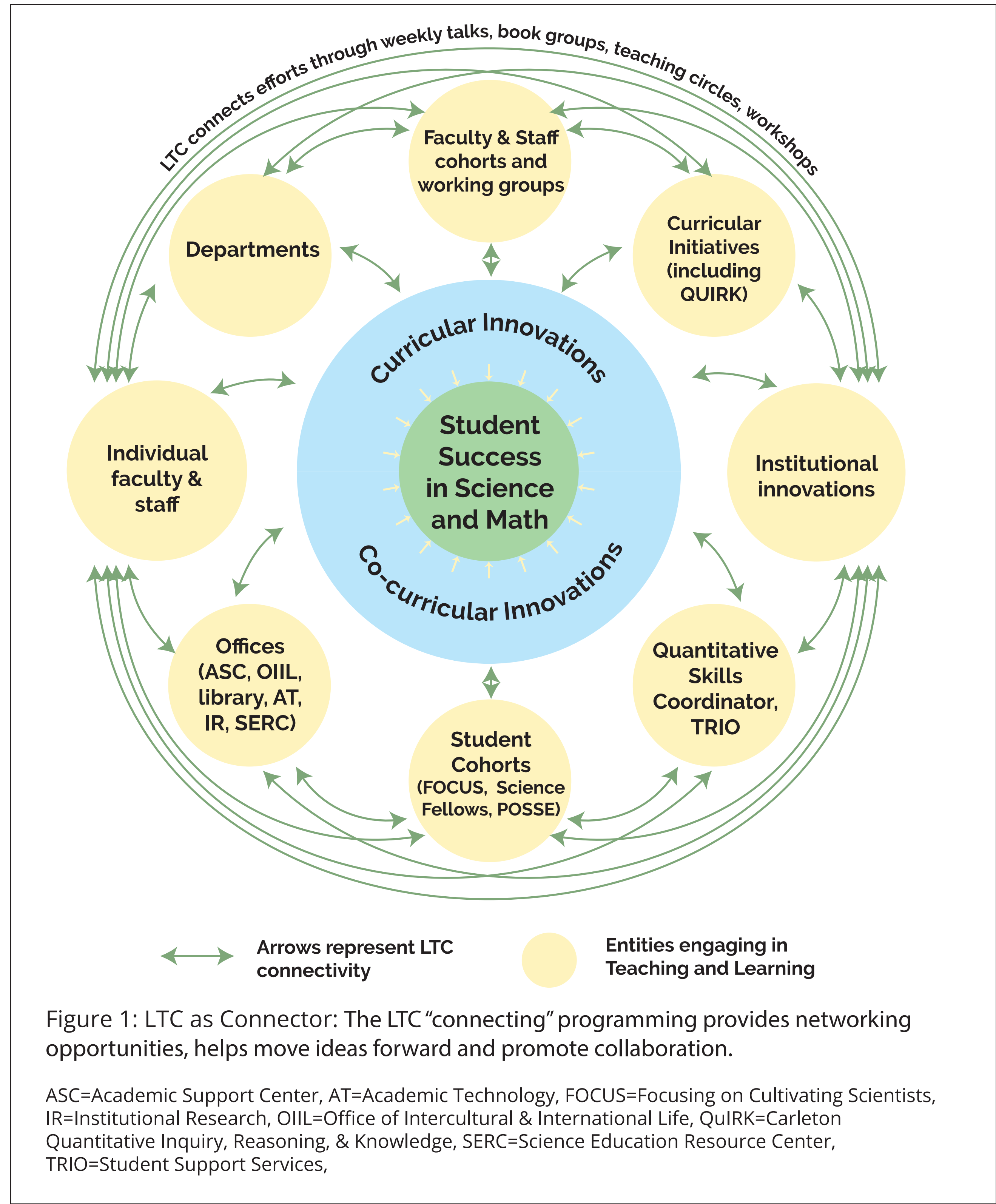
Carleton’s faculty and staff commit to ongoing and reflective teaching and learning practices with de-centralized pathways (Zimmerman & Rutz 2014). This culture is integral to the success of the LTC, and is also fostered by LTC offerings, including an annual workshop to capture new faculty immediately. Sharing of ideas and practices at weekly talks promotes curricular “risk taking” (Newman et al., 2014) where faculty are more willing to try new techniques after exposure to colleagues’ differing approaches (Condon et al., 2016, p. 76). Along with weekly talks, workshops, and book groups, the LTC structure helps to formally affirm the campus commitment to engaging with leading-edge teaching. This culture has an immediate effect even on visiting faculty, who utilize the LTC at the same rates as permanent faculty (Condon et al., 2016, p. 70).

## LTC as Connector

Teaching and learning efforts at Carleton often begin as self-directed, small-scale, and informal. These interests can find broader audiences at the various LTC venues to involve faculty, staff, and administrators. Because the topics are driven by faculty and staff interests, the content is relevant and responsive to ever-changing needs. The LTC acts as a bridge between:

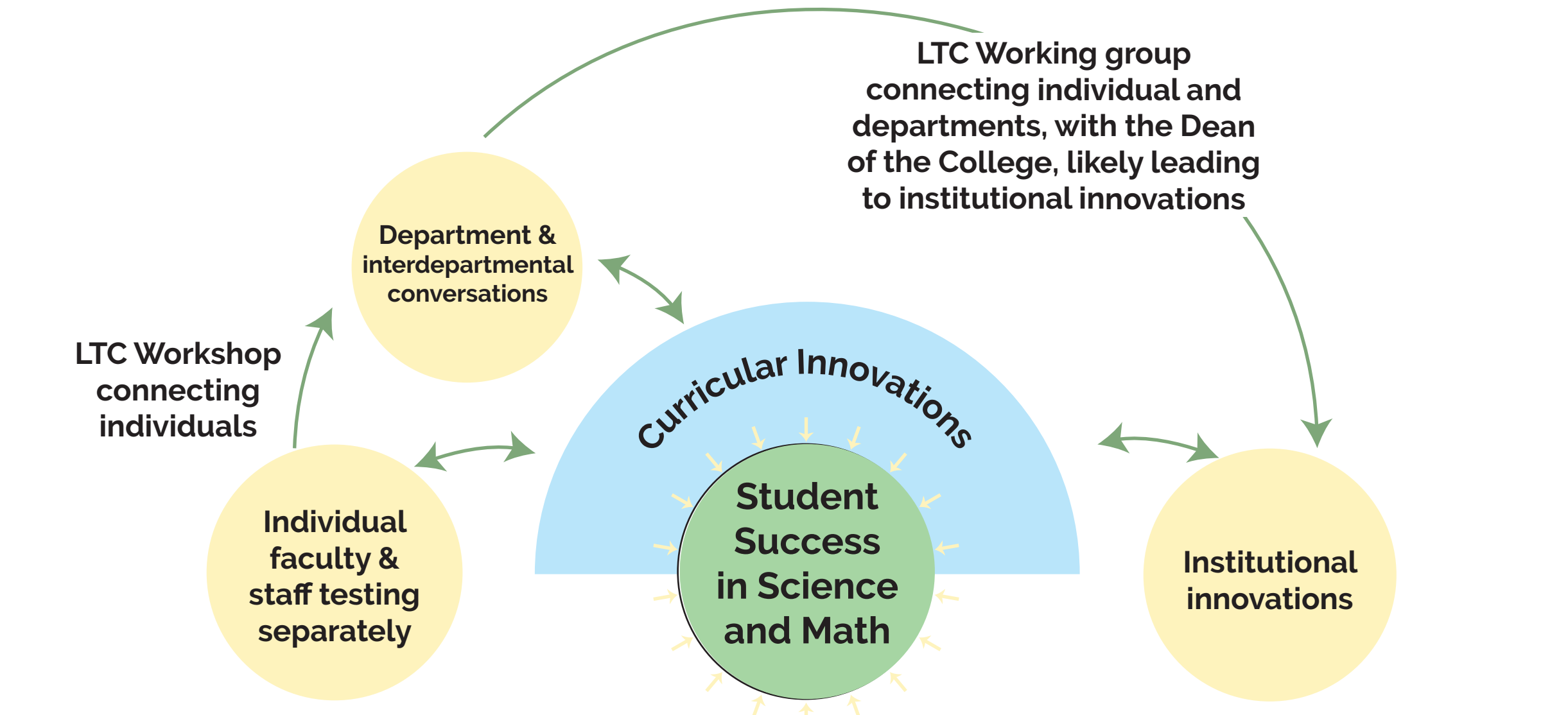
- \*Academic departments
- \*Academic support and student affairs offices
- \*Grant-funded initiatives
- \*Institutional research
- \*Administration.

The broad audience involved ensures that topics are explored through a “whole-student” lens. For example, in the classroom a student that is not willing to participate in discussion and not connecting with faculty may appear disconnected or aloof, while advisors and mentors outside the classroom may interact in a way that illuminates other non-content influences, such as lack of confidence, outside stressors, or lack of metacognitive skills. By connecting these perspectives, the LTC facilitates more nuanced discussions leading to interventions and solutions that are intentional and more impactful.



## Example Pathways: E-Portfolios

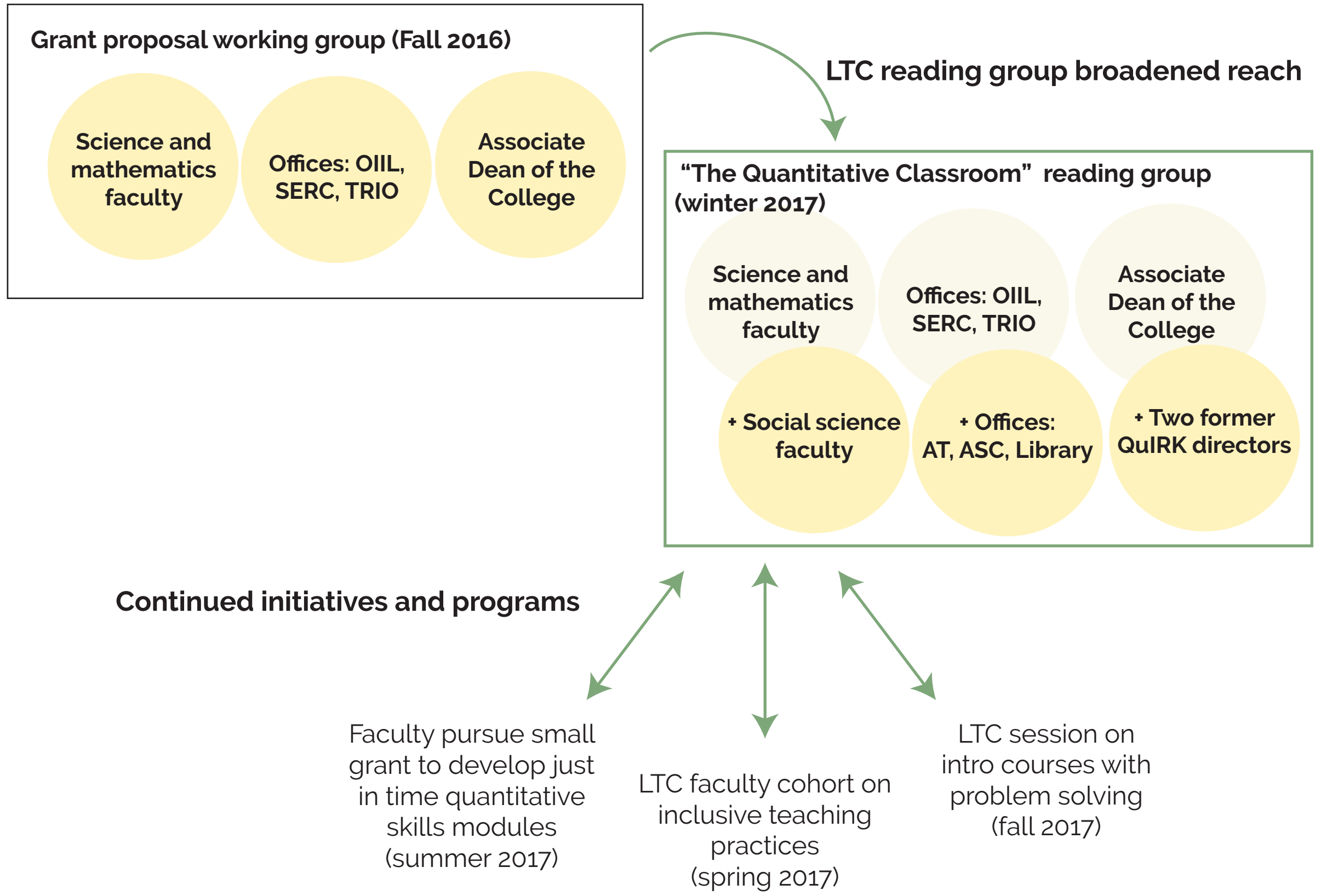
A recent example highlighting the LTC as connector is the discussion surrounding e-portfolios, which began with individuals, found broader interest at a faculty and staff workshop, continued with interdepartmental conversations, and currently has a working group of 20+ faculty and staff in discussion with the Dean of the College about next steps (figure 2). This dynamic system supports an organic pathway for improving education and can result in broad dissemination or institutional changes that align with the student and faculty needs. This broad cross-fertilization of ideas also minimizes “reinventing the wheel” by exploring lessons learned across the curriculum.



## Example Pathways: QS/QR Thread

Another example pathway began with a group of science and mathematics faculty and staff exploring inclusive teaching practices while writing a grant proposal. Those involved in the discussion included faculty from all of the science and math departments along with staff from the Science Education Resource Center (SERC), Office of Intercultural & International Life (OIIL), and the Quantitative Skills Coordinator from TRIO/Student Support Services. These planning meetings led to a focus on quantitative reasoning that was further explored with a winter LTC literature group that broadened the audience to include social science departments, staff from the Academic Support Center (ASC), Academic Technology, and the Library, and two former directors from the Quantitative Inquiry, Reasoning, & Knowledge (QuiRK) program. This broader group shared past individual and institutional successes and tied the ideas to research-based evidence (figure 3).

The results of the conversation influenced the LTC programming for the coming year, leading to relevant programming and, ultimately, positive change in the classroom.



## Take-Aways

The Perlman Center for Learning and Teaching (LTC) is a relatively small and decentralized program. The critical aspects of the program that could be scaled and reworked at other institutions include:

- \*Cultivating a culture of teaching and learning, and capturing new faculty early
- \*Connecting diverse groups of faculty, staff, and administrators, which promotes a culture of collaboration, takes a “whole-student” approach, and minimizes “reinventing the wheel”
- \*Tapping into current interests with faculty- and staff-led content
- \*Providing programming in a variety of formats to accommodate different types of exploration, including a venue to share current efforts and ways of connecting to the literature

## References

- Condon, W., Iverson, E. R., Manduca, C. A., Rutz, C., & Willett, G. (2016). *Faculty development and student learning: Assessing the connections*. Indiana University Press.
- Newman, L. E., Carpenter, S., Grawe, N., & Jaret-McKinstry, S. (2014). *Creating a Culture Conducive to Integrative Learning*. Peer Review, 16(4/1), 14.
- Zimmerman, C., & Rutz, C. (2014). *The Care and Maintenance of Faculty Culture: A Small College Curricular Approach*. Journal on Centers for Teaching & Learning, 6