Making a Difference: Three Decades of Canada’s Only National Teaching Award

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Abstract
The 3M National Teaching Fellowship (3MNTF) has been part of the Canadian higher education landscape for the past 31 years and has grown to be a community of 328 fellows, with up to ten more being added each year. As part of the 30-year anniversary of the Fellowship, we initiated a study to understand its impacts on the higher education community by examining the effect that the Fellowship has had on individual winners, the influence that fellows have been able to exert in their institutions after being awarded the 3M Fellowship, and the influence that the 3M National Teaching Fellowship program has had nationally and internationally. To identify the various impacts of the 3MNTF, we conducted focus groups with the 2012 cohort, 3M retreat facilitators and coordinators, and the representative from 3M Canada, as well as the new fellows from the 2013 cohort. In 2014, we conducted two focus groups with senior university administrators and educational developers. In 2015, we developed and administered an online survey to faculty, administrators, educational developers, and students at a number of Canadian universities. We found that the 3M is one of the most recognizable teaching awards in Canada’s higher education landscape. The structure of the fellowship has helped to shape local and international teaching awards, while individual fellows often provide mentorship to future leaders in education.

Keywords
3M National Teaching Fellowship, teaching award
The 3M National Teaching Fellowship has been part of the Canadian higher education landscape for over 30 years and has grown to be a community of 328 Fellows, with up to ten more being added each year. From the initial partnership between 3M Canada and the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) in 1985, through the inauguration of the first cohort of Fellows in 1986, to the formation of the Council of 3M National Fellows for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in 2003, the Fellowship continues to grow as a community of educators brought together by their passion for teaching and their love of learning.

While traditionally the Fellowship has been a university teaching award, 2016 marked the first year that the Fellowship was open to all post-secondary institutions (i.e., universities, colleges, cégeps, polytechnics).

Anecdotally, we are aware that Fellows are making a difference. We have heard that Fellows are engaged in teaching and learning innovations in their classrooms, with their cohorts, and through the 3M Council. They are mentoring faculty in their departments, delivering workshops at their own and other institutions, lending their time to centres for teaching and learning on their campuses, and leading change. Yet, despite a strong belief of the impact that the Fellowship has had on individual Fellows, their institutions and their communities, there has yet to be a thorough review of the program that could provide empirical data to support these beliefs.

Seeking to redress this oversight, and in honour of the Fellowship’s 30th anniversary, our research team embarked on a research project to measure the impact that the Fellowship has had on individual winners and their institutions. Over the course of the project, we were guided by three questions to help us to understand the influence that the Fellowship, and individual Fellows, have been able to exert in higher education: What influence does the 3M National Teaching Fellowship (3MNTF) have on individual recipients? What influence do the 3MNTF have on their institutions? And what influence does the 3MNTF have on the educational landscape outside of their institutions?

Studies of teaching awards in higher education have shown mixed results as to their impacts. Teaching awards may have a positive impact on faculty recruitment, retention, and satisfaction (Kalis & Kirschenbaum, 2008), as well as personal satisfaction, recognition, and prestige (Huggett et al., 2012). However, in their literature review of the utility of teaching awards, Huggett et al. found that “some recipients reported that receiving an award had drawbacks for their career, such as increased administrative responsibility and less time for research” (p. 913). Some teaching award recipients have also reported negative reactions in the form of apathy, jealousy, and resentment from colleagues (Mackenzie, 2007). The impact of awards programs on individual recipients and institutions are often determined by institutional culture. Piascik et al. (2011) suggest that “the impact of a teaching award program is maximized when the awards reflect the institutional culture and are part of a broader initiative to evaluate teaching that is based on excellence criteria adopted by the institution” (p. 253). Given the mixed reports of perceptions of teaching awards in higher education in the literature, it is imperative that award structures undergo periodic program evaluations to accurately assess their impact on the educational landscape.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee (The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Working Party on Aid Evaluation, 2002) defines impact as “positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended” (p. 24). For this project, we wanted a way to evaluate the impact the Fellowship has had on the landscape of higher education over the past 30 years. We wanted to measure the consequences, both positive and negative, for individual Fellows and their institutions. A problem, we quickly discovered, was how
to define impact. What does impact look like? What were the measurable outcomes that we could identify which would indicate that the Fellowship had been the catalyst for some kind of change? For the purposes of our study, we defined impact in terms of the influence that the program and Fellows have had departmentally, institutionally, nationally, and internationally.

**Method**

When thinking about impact, we were guided by questions about what programs and projects 3M Fellows have been involved with, what they have produced as a group and independently, whether their positions in their departments had changed after becoming a Fellow, and whether their own relationship to teaching had changed. We began by organizing artefacts, milestones, and events into a timeline to help us understand the evolution of the Fellowship. Since its inception in 2003, the Council of 3M National Fellows for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education / Conseil des lauréats nationaux 3M d’excellence en enseignement et en apprentissage dans l’enseignement supérieur has helped to build and support the Fellowship across cohorts, across disciplines, and across the country. The Council has been instrumental in creating several projects wherein the Fellows played a major role. These include three book publications (*Making a Difference, Silences in Teaching and Learning, and Students Speak*), as well as the digital title *Teaching Large Classes: 115 Ideas from 18 3M Teaching Fellows*. Other projects include Positive Pedagogy, a 3M Speaker’s List, and a Fellows’ Postcard project to commemorate the meaning of the Fellowship. 3M Fellows also initiated the Welcome to my Classroom sessions, now a permanent part of the STLHE Annual Conference. Looking at the broad dissemination of knowledge in which Fellows have participated reinforced our belief that Fellows were making a marked difference in their disciplines and their institutions.

To verify our initial impressions, we arranged focus groups with 3M Fellows, senior administrators, educational developers, 3M retreat facilitators and coordinators, and the representative from 3M Canada. Two focus groups were conducted at the 3MNTF retreat in Banff with the 2012 cohort, 3M retreat facilitators and coordinators, and the representative from 3M Canada (approved by the Research Ethics Board at Queen’s University, GCTL-018-12). At the STLHE 2013 conference, we conducted a third focus group with the 2013 cohort. In 2014, we conducted two focus groups with senior university administrators and educational developers at the Educational Developers Caucus Conference. The data collected from these focus groups were coded using Atlas.ti. One coder set the codes, which were then reviewed by the research team. Three additional coders were then brought in to finish coding the focus group transcripts. These focus groups provided us with “insider knowledge” from the perspectives of those who have been intimately involved with the Fellowship program.

In the third phase of our impact evaluation, we developed a survey which was sent to Fellows, faculty, administrators, educational developers, and students to assess various aspects of the Fellowship program including familiarity with the Fellowships, influence, process related questions and its overall impact (see the Appendix). We had 1085 responses to this survey from various disciplines and 47 institutions across Canada; however, not all participants responded to each question, and we had a number of respondents who did not respond beyond the first consent to respond question (190). Further, in a gateway question on the first page of the survey we asked

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1 Ethical clearance for this project was provided by Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board.
respondents “are you aware of the 3M National Teaching Fellowship (3MNTF)?” If they answered no to this question, then the survey was terminated. This eliminated 515 surveys, 407 of which were from student respondents. This left us with 379 respondents who completed the majority of the survey. Although we collected demographic information from all of the participants, only those who were aware of the Fellowship were included in the data analysis (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Drop in response rate from gateway question.](image)

This three-phase approach to program evaluation provided us with multiple points of view, and multiple departure points from which to examine the impact of the Fellowship. The purpose of this type of approach

is to strengthen the reliability of data, validity of the findings and recommendations, and to broaden and deepen our understanding of the processes through which program outcomes and impacts are achieved, and how these are affected by the context within which the program is implemented. (Bamberger, 2012, p. 1)

**Results**

**3M National Teaching Fellowship Program**

We found that 42% of questionnaire respondents were aware of the 3MNTF, while only 18% were aware of other national teaching and learning awards. The 42% of survey respondents who indicated they were aware of the 3M Fellowship may also be misleading low. There was a very high response rate among students from one university which resulted in 407 students indicating that they were not aware of the Fellowship program. This may indicate an opportunity to raise awareness of the Fellowship with student populations. We also found that the majority of educational developers, administrators and faculty (70%) thought that their institutions valued having 3M Fellowship nominations.

Despite the recognition of the Fellowship, and institutional valuing of the award, one focus group participant suggested that “I think there is a gap between the institutional valuing of the award and the support that is provided to help people develop the kinds of profiles that they need to be successful.” This individual did, however, end on an optimistic note, saying that “it is safe to say that [support] may change moving forward.”

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Institution

Of our questionnaire respondents, 25% of educational developers, faculty, and administration thought that teaching and learning awards at their institutions had been influenced by the 3MNTF. This group also indicated that 3M Fellows were very visible within their institutions, as 82% of educational developers, faculty, and administration were aware of 3M Fellows at their current institutions. According to educational developers, almost 40% of 3M Fellows contribute to the teaching and learning centres at their institutions. They lend their experience to “talks and workshops.” They “lead sessions on teaching and take the lead on some curriculum initiatives.” They also mentor early career faculty who might be working towards one day becoming a 3M Fellow:

it was not until my nominator, as well as the person who was delivering the teaching certificate at our EDC [Educational Developers Caucus] who was also a 3M award winner, said . . . consider this [the Fellowship]. It changed it from something that was inaccessible to something that could be accessible. And to have that encouragement. To go through the nomination process and [have someone] guide you through that, and to encourage you was a big deal.

As one Fellow pointed out, “There are a lot of really great teachers in this country in every institution who really don’t have an opportunity because they are lacking resources. Maybe the current winners have to help with that.”

Individual

We found that only 35% of faculty, administrators, and educational developers who responded to our survey had been nominated for a 3M Fellowship; 90% of those nominees were successful. When asked about the impact that becoming a Fellow has had, many successful nominees suggest feeling “valorized (for the first time in my life) as a teacher,” and that it reaffirmed their faith in teaching.

You come out of a class and you have had nothing but recalcitrant[s] in the class and all the good ones have stayed away and nobody is getting what you are saying. And you come back and you think back to Montebello [site of 3M retreat] and think back to your dossier and some of your nomination letters and you think [it’s] not so bad after all. I just find it remarkably affirming and it gives me a sense of who I am and my purpose and my mission within the institution.

It was a validation of the craft of teaching.

Some Fellows suggested that it gave them more confidence in the classroom, as well as to speak up institutionally. One Fellow noted, “I think the most significant [impact] was that it gave me confidence to take the necessary risks associated with innovative teaching, and encouraged me to speak both at the institution and nationally about the importance of teaching and learning.” The Fellow further noted that the award “encouraged ongoing growth and development in my own career and gave me the confidence to develop leadership opportunities on campus and beyond.”
Others pointed to the weight of increased responsibility that came with becoming a Fellow. One Fellow stated,

. . . thinking okay I can never give a bad class. I can never walk in and do just a crappy class. We have all had those days. I can’t do a syllabus that is an average syllabus anymore. And I thought how do I receive this? Will this be a burden and I now put pressure on myself for the rest of my life, or is this a challenge and I am so happy to have it? If someone came in and said you are a terrible teacher and we will fire you unless you do this and this and this. I just would not do it. But if someone said okay you are a great teacher and you need to prove it every day then I would do it.

Another Fellow stated,

It ups the ante for your teaching practice because you know that your feet are in the fire. . . For me it was being able to wake up every morning and think okay it is going to be a good day. And that there was no way around that.

Yet another stated, “And it turned into a responsibility to also teach well because you have this reputation to teach well.”

Many Fellows also indicated that they saw the Fellowship as a part of their identities: “I cannot separate being a 3M Fellow from who I am.” Another stated,

. . . it gave me an identity that I did not have before. I really became new. I changed profoundly and I could see myself now as someone within a profession as a professional whereas before I was kind of doing it almost like a sub-contractor who nobody wanted to know about.

Being a 3M Fellow can become part of a recipient’s identity, making the achievement a part of both his/her professional and personal sense of self.

Community

In part, we found that this sense of identity that Fellows indicated is forged during the annual retreat for each new cohort. While there is no monetary value attached to the Fellowship, winners from each year join others from their cohort at a four-day retreat where they can share ideas with like-minded people. Many of our focus group participants mentioned the retreat as a highlight of their Fellowship. Originally held at Château Montebello in Quebec and more recently at the Banff Springs Hotel in Alberta, before returning to Montebello, the retreat provides a space and place for Fellows to come together to share their passion for teaching.

Since many Fellows come from departments that may value research over teaching, there is relief to find themselves connecting with other people who live in an environment that was in general indifferent or outright hostile to people who cared about teaching. That it just did not count. [At the retreat] there were other people like me who cared passionately about teaching and who could talk about it forever and who were delighted to do so.
The sense of belonging that is found at the retreat means that it can also be an incredibly emotional experience for some winners. One coordinator explained this Fellowship as

exactly a place and a space of colleagues who are really friends. Where the lines of professional conduct got blurred with truth telling and being. You did not have to impress them. You could be a fool one day. I have cried in front of people. I have not done that with family. This is big. I have done it in places at the most unexpected times. That has been the Fellowship of a kindred trust.

Another participant remarked that, at the retreat,

The sense of community came through . . . People are sharing shy and personal stories and I was starting to share . . . I can count on one hand the number of people that I have told those stories to. The fact [is] that I feel comfortable sharing those things with this group.

While people felt that bonding with like-minded people during the retreat was a very positive experience, there were some questions about how to maintain that bond as people return to their lives after the retreat. As one coordinator recalled, “after the experience was over people disappeared. I guess I have seen maybe three other people from my cohort after that.” For some 3MNTFs, the absence of their immediate cohort has been replaced with the larger 3M community. For one coordinator, the “award itself was very powerful,” but so was the “idea of connecting people across cohorts.” Even when cohorts do remain bonded, “I don’t think that it is just our cohort, but who you connect with well. Whether it is personalities or more opportunities to interact.” Every individual, and each cohort, becomes a part of “a larger community of Fellows who include them from the start in teaching and learning initiatives led by the 3M Council” (Ahmad, Stockley, & Moore, 2013, p. 187).

In the province of Quebec, where perceptions of the 3MNTF seem to differ, one administrator suggested that

I don’t think there is a lot of will to go outside the province for that. Maybe I am wrong but [STHLE] might be perceived as an Anglo driven organization that has little to do with Quebec. And I don’t think there are people against it, it just seems like it is over there and again take it with a grain of salt.

While the importance of the award may be perceived differently at Francophone or Anglophone institutions, one facilitator suggested that participation in the retreat, a key aspect of the award, could be made difficult or stressful due to language barriers:

I was terrified. [They] recruited me as bilingual but not at the level of discussion that usually takes place here. I began frantically reading the [STLHE] bulletin in two languages just to get the lingo. I was worried that I would be a Fellow who was uni-lingual French.
Student Perspective

Perhaps one of the greatest indicators of the impact that Fellows have had is in the responses from students who have passed through their classrooms. Only one institution, McMaster University, distributed the questionnaire across their entire student listserv, which resulted in a larger number of student responses from McMaster; however, we believe that the responses provided by these students are representative of the experiences of students taught by 3M Fellows. Of the 101 respondents who indicated that they had been taught by a 3M Fellow, 33 were willing to provide additional details about their experiences.

In our focus groups with Fellows, administrators, and educational developers, we found that while there was a lot of enthusiasm for teaching, most were reluctant to draw attention to their positions as Fellows in their classrooms.

It is not like I have a little badge. We use it [Fellowship] in some of our bios for some of the things that we promote where people want teaching credentials, but I would never tell my students. It is does not seem appropriate. I am there to teach them and not to make it all about me.

One respondent indicated a disbelief that students would be interested in knowing which faculty were 3M Fellows.

I am not aware of students clamoring to have a 3M for their professor or anything like that. But I do know that we use the title. For example, in educational development we might say this workshop is going to be led by a 3M person or something like that. I am not sure to what extent students are our primary target audience . . . I am not sure to what extent they are linked to the whole 3M process or even recognizing it themselves.

In our responses from students, however, we found that students would like to be made aware of the projects that Fellows are involved with. One student indicated that “it would be wonderful if 3MNTF would make their dossier public to share their wisdom with the world.” While most students were not quite this explicit in their responses, they did indicate that they perceived a decided difference in their classroom experiences when a 3M Fellow had taught them. One student stated,

I have been taught by multiple professors who [have] won a 3M National Teaching Fellowship. These instructors were enthusiastic about engaging their students, had a passion for the material, and took great lengths to teach in a manner that reflected their desire for students to really learn and develop.

Another student said,

These faculty members tended to be more creative and took bigger risks in teaching. I found these faculty members would be willing to break traditional educational paradigms and this really helped shape my academic career as a physician and as someone who teaches.
Yet another student remarked,

All 3M teaching Fellows that I have been taught by have been amazing teachers who explain complex concepts in simple, innovative, and intuitive ways. I feel blessed to have been taught by them, and even regret not being a better student and taking advantage of all the resources they made available to help me succeed.

Another student noted, “The teaching was engaging, creative, passionate; more so than other professors.” Overall, students who responded to the survey reported that they perceived a difference between courses taught by 3M Fellows, and those that were not taught by 3M Fellows.

**Discussion**

There were some limitations to our study. The focus groups that we conducted were at 3M retreats and with 3M Fellows and those who were supportive of the Fellowship. This provided us with participants who may have been more favourably inclined towards the Fellowship. While there was more diversity in the responses we received for the survey, it is possible that those who chose to respond were more interested in issues surrounding teaching and learning in higher education.

Teaching awards are not new to North American higher education. The University of California awarded its first institutional teaching award in 1959, and the University of Massachusetts established a similar program in 1962 (Sorcinelli & Davis, 1996). More than 50 years later, you may be hard pressed to find an institution of higher education that does not offer some kind of recognition for outstanding teaching. We discovered that the 3M Fellowship is one of the best-known teaching award programs in Canada, although there remain opportunities to increase awareness of the program, particularly with students. Survey data suggests that the 3MNTF program is one of the most prestigious awards programs in Canada and has influenced institutional, regional, and international teaching awards, including South Africa’s National Teaching Excellence Awards, and Ireland’s National Academy for the Integration of Research and Teaching and Learning’s (NAIRTL) Excellence in Teaching Awards scheme (Alexander & O’Mahony, 2015; Leibowitz, Farmer, Franklin, & Council on Higher Education - South Africa, 2012).

Many of the successful nominees who join the Fellowship indicate feeling an increased responsibility to their teaching, and as a voice of leadership in teaching. At the same time, many Fellows suggest that being a 3M Fellow has become a part of both their professional and personal identities. This is an important consideration since faculty can be influenced by the hidden curriculum of their institutions or departments which may, for example, implicitly reinforce a hierarchy of research/clinical service above teaching or at the expense of teaching (Hafler et al., 2011). Lowenstein, Fernandez, and Crane (2007) found that two of the top ten “experiential predictors of serious intent to leave academic medicine” were “the School does not adequately recognize innovative and high-quality teaching,” and “my department does not foster and reward teaching excellence” (p. 4). Teaching awards may help to counter the perception that teaching is not recognized as valuable in the same way that research or clinical service is valued.

We found that one of the recurring themes in both the survey and the focus groups was a sense of community which began with the cohort retreat. This sense of community, however, can be disrupted by perceptions of language inclusivity. Educators from Francophone institutions may
perceive the Fellowship as being inaccessible due to language barriers. Skelton’s (2004) study of
the UK’s National Teaching Fellowships Scheme found additional barriers to Fellows working
“collectively to promote effective teaching and learning in higher education” (p. 460) including

(a) their perception of themselves as subject specialists; (b) their gravitation towards other
individuals in the group of 20 who shared similar interests and/or project concerns; (c) the
perception that some Fellowship holders were more experienced in educational
development work than others; and (d) the overall focus on achieving one's own individual
project. (Skelton, 2004, p. 460)

Our findings suggest a similar concern from Fellows who want to stay connected beyond the retreat
and their cohort project. It remains to be seen what impact, if any, the eligibility of all post-
secondary teachers (not just university teachers), might have on the Fellowship’s sense of
community.

We also found that 3M Fellows are contributing to the culture of teaching and learning at
their individual institutions through involvement in their teaching centres and though mentorship
of other faculty members. While Halse, Deane, Hobson, and Jones (2007) question whether
winners of the Australian Awards for University Teaching are contributing to improved teaching
practices at their institutions because of a dearth of publications in scholarship of teaching and
learning (SoTL) from the winners, our findings suggest that teaching award winners contribute
through more hands-on engagement. If SoTL is the primary metric on which to measure
contribution, then other aspects of contribution such as those mentioned here may be overlooked,
including informal mentorship of faculty within their departments. However, our findings do
suggest that Fellows could be more visible in their institutional communities through involvement
into their Centres for Teaching and Learning.

Conclusion

Moving forward, our research results suggest the need for further assessment of the
program through ongoing, systematic collection of data. This might take the form of data collection
by the 3MNT Program Coordinators or within the 3M Council of National Teaching Fellows. This
need for data is particularly critical as the Fellowship undergoes significant changes with the 2017
cohort being the first one that is open to all teachers in all post-secondary institutions in Canada.

The 3MNTF Program also needs to find ways to honour and ensure that Francophone
recipients of the award are comfortable participating in all aspects of the Fellowship, as this can
have a negative effect on Fellows’ perceived sense of community.

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Appendix

3M National Fellowship Impact Questionnaire

Indicate your association with the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE)?

- Current Member
- Former Member
- Not a Member
- Other ______________________

With which post-secondary institution are you associated?

________________________

What is your primary academic discipline? Identify one even if multiple disciplines apply.

- Business
- Engineering
- Health Sciences
- Humanities
- Natural Sciences
- Social Sciences
- Other ______________________

What role do you most identify with (choose one even if multiple roles apply)?

- Administrator
- Educational Developer
- Faculty
- Student
- Other ______________________

How long have you worked in higher education? Enter number of years.

________________________

Are you aware of the 3M National Teaching Fellowship (3MNTF)?

- Yes
- No
Are you aware of other national teaching and learning awards?

- Yes
- No

List the other programs of which you are aware.

Insert list

Have faculty at your current institution been nominated for the 3M National Teaching Fellowship?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

At your institution, who initiates the nomination process for the 3M National Teaching Fellowship? Select all that apply.

- Administration
- Department Heads
- Deans
- Colleagues
- Centre for Teaching and Learning
- Unsure
- Other ______________________

Have you participated in preparing a 3M National Teaching Fellowship nomination for yourself or others?

- Yes
- No

In what capacity?

- Administrative support
- Principal nominator
- Reference writer
- Research support
- Other

In what other capacity have you participated in the nomination process?

Insert list
Approximately how many hours did you spend in preparing the nomination from start to finish?


Does your institution value having 3M Teaching Fellowship nominations?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Have you ever been taught by a 3M National Teaching Fellow?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Please elaborate on this experience.


Are there any 3M National Teaching Fellows at your current institution?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Have teaching awards at your institution been influenced by the 3M National Teaching Fellowships?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Please elaborate.


Do the 3M National Teaching Fellows contribute to your Teaching and Learning Centre?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
Please elaborate.

What impacts have 3M National Teaching Fellows had on your institution?

- No impact
- Small impact
- Moderate impact
- Large impact
- Unsure

Please elaborate.

What impacts has the 3M National Teaching Fellowship Program had on your institution?

- No impact
- Small impact
- Moderate impact
- Large impact
- Unsure

Please elaborate.

Does your institution nominate faculty for other external teaching awards?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Please provide any examples.

If applicable, briefly describe the impact of successful 3M National Teaching Fellowship nominations at your institution.
If applicable, briefly describe the impact of unsuccessful 3M National Teaching Fellowship nominations at your institution.

Have you been nominated for a 3M National Teaching Fellowship?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Have you received a 3M National Teaching Fellowship?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

In what year did you receive the fellowship?

[ ]

How did receiving this award impact you professionally?

[ ]

Describe any impacts of the 3M National Teaching Fellowship regarding your:

- Academic career
- Teaching
- Influence on student learning
- Other

How can we increase the impact of the 3M National Teaching Fellowship?

[ ]

Please provide any additional comments you have about the 3M National Teaching Fellowship.

[ ]