

OFF-SITE FACULTY

Perspectives on Online Experiences

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This report presents a cross case analysis involving faculty teaching online from off-site international and interstate locations. The study yielded enabling factors, benefits, communication systems, and challenges in the areas of administration, curriculum, communications, and faculty characteristics. The benefits included the opportunity to be involved in an online teaching and learning model where both the student and the faculty members were at a distance from the physical campus. Retention of experienced faculty, continued utilization of faculty with critical expertise, expansion of the faculty teaching pool, faculty development, and enhanced program visibility were judged to be additional benefits. The major challenges primarily involved communications.

INTRODUCTION

While increasingly large numbers of students are flocking to online courses (Sloan, 2008), a small but perhaps critically important number of faculty are now teaching online from locations that are at a distance from a physical campus. This newer phenomenon was the focus of a study that investigated two purposefully selected cases where faculty taught from remote locations. One location was interstate and the other was international.

ABBREVIATED SUMMARY OF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Previous research regarding faculty members involved in online instruction has focused on

various aspects of online teaching including attitudes (Baldwin, 1998; Bonk, 2001, 2009; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000; Lee, 2001; Maguire, 2005; National Education Association, 2000; Northrup, 1997; O'Quinn & Corry, 2002; Parisot, 1997), barriers (Berge, 1998; Betts, 1998; Chizmar & Williams, 2001; Dooley & Murphrey, 2000; Jones & Moller, 2002; Maguire, 2005; O'Quinn & Corry, 2002; Parisot, 1997; Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, & Marx, 1999; Schifter, 2000) and motivators (Betts, 1998; Bonk, 2001; Chizmar & Williams, 2001; Dooley & Murphrey, 2000; Jones & Moller, 2002; Lee, 2001; Parisot, 1997; Rockwell et al., 1999; Schifter, 2000) to faculty participation, decisions regarding online teaching and the creation of quality courses

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(Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000; National Education Association, 2000; O'Quinn, 2002; Shea, 2007), and faculty engagement as a contributing factor for student success (McClure, 2007; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005).

These sources, while not specifically focused on the location of the faculty member, were reviewed and considered as related to this investigation. Similarly, literature from business involving managing and developing off-site employees was considered as useful (Dwyer, 2010; Janove, 2004; Javitch, 2007; Nichols, 2010). This investigation of the literature suggested that study was needed to contribute to understanding the emerging issues related to the use of off-site faculty for online instruction.

METHODOLOGY

Case methodology was selected for this study. The work of Yin (1994) informed this choice. Eisenhardt's (1989) guidance regarding theoretical rather than statistical sampling led to the selection of the two cases chosen for investigation. Pettigrew's (1988) recommendation that, when the number of cases is small, case selection should be made so as to extend or develop the emergence of theory was also used. Hence, the experiences of one faculty member teaching internationally and one faculty member teaching interstate were recorded, tabulated, and analyzed. Additionally, data was collected and analyzed from a department chair who had either present or past administrative responsibility for the program areas of these case faculty members. Both faculty members and the administrator are tenured and have been employed by the same university for more than 25 years. The university is a large, urban, public institution with a solid commitment to online delivery of courses.

For both cases, the relocation of a spouse was the primary driver for the desire to teach online from the remote location. For case one,

the international experience, the faculty member continues to teach from the off-site location and had done so for approximately 5 years at the time of data collection. For case two, the interstate experience, the faculty member returned to campus after teaching from the remote location for 2 years. In both cases, during the time off-campus, faculty responsibilities, loads, and full-time equivalence were adjusted to compensate for absence from campus. Adjustments were made to match full-time equivalence with teaching load and professional service, while expectations for scholarly productivity remained the same.

Each researcher also assumed the role of participant-as-observer, collecting and recording data over a 12-month period. Within-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989) provided preliminary familiarity with the data. Then, cross-case analysis facilitated considerations beyond the initial impressions (Eisenhardt, 1989). Themes began to emerge as data grids were developed (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Pratt, 2009). This enumeration and categorization of the data further facilitated analysis.

FINDINGS

Three critical components emerged as important aspects related to the success of off-site faculty: administration, curriculum and instruction, and faculty characteristics. Greater investigation then revealed that for each of these components four elements played a critical role: enabling factors, benefits, communications, and challenges. For example, with respect to administration, enabling factors, benefits, communications issues, and challenges were found to exist. Similarly, for curriculum and instruction, there were enabling factors, benefits, communications issues, and challenges. Finally, with regard to faculty characteristics there were enabling factors, benefits, communications issues, and challenges. These are described in brief below.

Administration

Enabling Factors. Administrative philosophical support and systems for accomplishing essential tasks were critical.

Benefits. Identified benefits to the university administration included retention of productive faculty members; utilization of personnel with specific expertise; extension of the faculty pool; workload balancing for instruction, curriculum development, or special projects; cross-country or international program exposure; and release of funds back into the instructional budget when partial leaves were involved. Further, faculty could be used who were knowledgeable about the courses and programs; had training, interest, and experience in online course delivery; and had existing productive relationships with on-campus program faculty to facilitate future program development.

Communications. Administrative venues for communication included e-mail, periodic campus visits, instant messaging, Elluminate Live! or a similar web conferencing tool, fax, Skype or a comparable voice over Internet protocol application, document scanning, and telephone. Consistent and timely communication among the faculty, staff, and administrators was imperative.

Challenges. Primary administrative challenges were identified as changed contact venues, constraints by upper administration, peer perceptions, and missed opportunities for training and mentoring.

Curriculum and Instruction

Enabling Factors. The personal attributes of faculty including positive philosophy of online education, online teaching experience, content area expertise, and instructional design capability were enabling factors related to curriculum and instruction. Support systems, personnel, and equipment were also deemed important. These factors in combination enabled committed faculty members with extensive experience to continue curriculum

development and instruction in a consistent manner. Additionally, funds released into the instructional budget by partial faculty leaves allowed additional course sections to be taught by part-time faculty.

Communications. Communications with students, other faculty members, and staff on curricular issues was facilitated in multiple ways. A learning management system (WebCT in the two cases) together with a faculty developed website used discussion boards, games and simulations, content modules, e-mail, telephone, assignments, and evaluation tools to communicate faculty-to-student and vice-versa regarding course content and processes. E-mail, phone, and campus visits enabled curriculum management communications with other faculty members and staff.

Challenges. Many of the challenges related to curriculum and instruction in these cases were the same as those encountered when converting face-to-face courses to online courses. Additionally, building a classroom community and facilitating teamwork were judged by these faculty members to require a high level of faculty engagement, including frequent instructor-student interactions. In general, student and faculty engagement with each other and with the course was critical. Techniques to foster engagement included asynchronous discussion boards; synchronous discussions, presentations, and question/answer sessions; and increased faculty presence online.

Faculty Characteristics

Enabling Factors. Faculty characteristics that appeared as beneficial for successful off-site instruction included being adaptive, technologically literate, self-disciplined, able to work without social reinforcement, and not a procrastinator; and having an independent work style, good time management skills, a highly developed work ethic, collegial relationships with other faculty, strong grasp of the content area, ability and interest in instructional design, and ability to develop and maintain connections with on-campus personnel.

An off-site workstation and environment conducive to online instruction was essential.

Benefits. Retention of employment, flexibility to work independently, increased productivity based on fewer workplace distractions, and intellectual stimulation were found to be benefits to the faculty members in these cases.

Communications. In addition to communicating with students, retaining and developing effective communications with faculty, staff, and administrators was important. Lack of immediacy and facial input inherent in the use of e-mail as the primary communication tool inhibited effective communications.

Challenges. The faculty members in these cases missed the collegiality of peers and the stimulation of interacting in person with students. Informal interactions such as casually sharing an idea were less likely to occur. Establishing new collegial relationships was, similarly, more challenging.

REFLECTION

Reflection on the cross case analysis of these cases involving faculty members teaching off-site from international and interstate locations yielded enabling factors, benefits, communication systems and challenges in the pertinent areas of administration, curriculum, communications, and faculty characteristics. Most notably, the benefits found included the opportunity for both faculty and students to be involved in an online teaching and learning model where both the student and the faculty member were at a distance from the physical campus. Retention of experienced faculty, continued utilization of faculty with critical expertise, expansion of the potential faculty teaching pool, faculty development, and enhanced program visibility in international and interstate settings were judged to be additional benefits. The major challenges identified primarily involved communications.

With continued growth in the popularity and delivery of online instruction, new oppor-

tunities and challenges emerge. Among these are issues related to the physical location of instructional faculty. Investigation of these cases yielded a preliminary look at some of the inherent factors that can exist in the use of off-site faculty members. Further investigation, including diverse cases and situations, is likely to be prudent to achieve more complete consideration of this facet of the expanding practice of online education.

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