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# The Faculty Perspective Regarding Their Role in Distance Education Policy Making

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## Abstract

Many times distance education policy is created after an institution has already begun offering online courses and programs. In addition, faculty members may be left out of the discussions about and creation of distance education policy, yet expected to willingly teach online courses. A recent study exploring faculty perceptions of the distance education policy development process found a strong interest of faculty in having a role in the development of that policy. Furthermore, the results of the study provide contextual effects on faculty participation in the policy development process which inform distance learning administrators with program planning.

## Introduction

In a recent report from The Sloan Consortium, higher education institutions reported that almost 3.2 million students took an online course during the fall semester of 2005; this is up from 2.3 million in fall 2004 (Allen & Seaman, 2006). This move into the mainstream – not new to distance learning administrators – is facilitating a growth in the amount of research regarding various aspects of distance education, including faculty development, student services, and distance education policy. Yet while general information about distance education policy exists, literature about the development of that policy along with the faculty perspective is absent. The majority of literature within distance education policy is prescriptive (giving ideas about what policy should be in place) or descriptive (providing examples of what is in place) (Moore & Thompson, 1997). The few studies that exist provide information from the administrative perspective, analysis of distance education policy, or suggestions for policy development.

This article provides an overview of the findings of Maguire's (2007) study of faculty teaching online in three four-year public institutions and their perspectives on their institution's distance education policies. Following details regarding the purpose and methodology of the study, a summary of the study's findings and recommendations for distance education administrators are provided.

## Purpose and Method

The purpose of the research was to examine the distance education policymaking process and focus on the faculty stakeholders within the context of three public, four-year institutions that are members of a state system of higher education. The study explored faculty perceptions as to how they and others are involved with the creation of distance education policy (role and process) and the impacts on the field of distance education. The

questions that guided this study included: a) what are faculty perceptions of how distance education policy is created, who creates it, and who should create it? b) what are faculty perceptions as to the role and impact of policy in distance education? c) what is the nature of faculty involvement in the development of distance education policy? and d) why do faculty think it is important to be involved in the distance education policy making system as a whole?

This research was conducted through the lens of a policy development model (The Multiple Streams Model) and used the methodology of a qualitative case study with a systems perspective. The systems perspective attempts to answer the question of “how and why does this system as a whole function as it does” (Patton, 2002, p. 119). The systems perspective also notes that a “system cannot be split into separate parts and still be useful” (Gyford, 1999, ¶ 2). The various parts of a system are interrelated; thus, when a change is made to one part of the system, all of the other parts are affected. In this policy study, distance education policy development was reviewed from a systems perspective through the method of case study. This is appropriate as the systems perspective considers not only the object of study but the context of the object – the whole picture – and the case being studied is a bounded system, which is bounded by time and place and has interrelated parts that form a whole.

Case study is very suitable for understanding policy initiatives especially in areas where the policy research is lacking (Gerring, 2004; Polsby, 1984). Furthermore, according to Corcoran, Walker, and Wals (2004), case study research “contributes to practice by improving the reasoning of practitioners (technical, normative, or, preferably, both). This improvement may be confined to one institution that uses the case study as a means to improve their own practices, or more broadly, to other practitioners in other institutions who learn from this innovation” (p. 11).

This research required the use of a purposeful sample, which also provided the bounded system necessary for case study research. Criterion sampling assured that each person met minimum requirements for experience with and knowledge of distance education. Not only did faculty have varying years of experience in distance teaching, they also came from a variety of academic disciplines and various levels of faculty rank (i.e. adjunct, instructor, full professor, etc.). The study employed three methods of data collection: observation, document analysis and interviews. Categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, and pattern-matching were the methods used to analyze data – all done via within-case and cross-case analyses.

## **Findings**

This study resulted in two findings relevant to distance education administrators: 1) faculty can impact distance education policy by sharing their experience and having greater involvement in distance education policy development and 2) contextual factors affect policy development and faculty involvement in the process.

### *Faculty can Impact Distance Education Policy by Sharing Their Experiences and Having Greater Involvement in Distance Education Policy Development*

The faculty interviewed indicated an interest in greater involvement in distance education policy development. This finding is significant because actual research studies in the

literature of distance education policy do not reflect the need for or interest in involvement of faculty. General recommendations for including faculty in policy development (Compora, 2003; Fish, 2007; Haché, 1998; Hearn, 1998; Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Lapworth, 2004; Mumper, 1983; Schifter, 2000b) and for faculty leadership in the process (ACE, 2003; Feenberg, 1999; Rockwell, et al., 1999; Zeller, 1995) were found in the prescriptive literature in the areas of both distance education policy and higher education governance.

This study found that faculty members do not necessarily want to be the only stakeholders involved in policy development; rather, they would like to play a greater role in the process. This role ranges from active participation in policy development committees to a venue for providing recommendations for policy. As supported in the literature, face-to-face faculty who also teach online as well as those who teach solely online shared a concern regarding the lack of involvement by faculty with online teaching experience in policy development (Hearn, 1998; Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Fish, 2007). Furthermore, faculty would like to see student involvement in the process or be able to represent students' interests in the process. The benefit of faculty involvement in support of the student is also noted in the distance education literature (Pacey & Keough, 2003).

The findings also reveal that greater faculty involvement in distance education policy development will lead to clarification of current and/or conflicting policies and addition of potential policies that faculty note are missing and needed. Another result of faculty involvement is a sense of ownership in online programming and a sense of enthusiasm for online teaching.

#### *Contextual Factors Affect Policy Development and Faculty Involvement in the Process*

The distance education policy development literature fails to discuss contextual details surrounding policy development in the distance education arena. This research found that the political, structural, and historical context must be considered when policy is developed as it influences faculty participation in the process of distance education policy development. The faculty in this study discussed the variety of people involved in policy making noting the dynamics and politics surrounding faculty type—full-time versus contingent faculty. Politics and power were also discussed in reference to navigating the various levels of decision making within a state system of higher education. Furthermore the contextual issues of structure (department, institution, state system) and history were also noted as having an affect on faculty.

*Faculty Type.* Faculty in this study discussed issues such as support or lack thereof for the contingent faculty, benefits of having contingent faculty, and concerns of full-time faculty about contingent faculty. Furthermore, faculty discussed a tension between the full-time faculty and the contingent faculty, which is more pronounced due to the growth in contingent faculty. According to the American Association for University Professors (AAUP) (2007), “both part- and full-time non-tenure-track appointments are continuing to increase” with “48 percent of all faculty serve in part-time appointments, and non-tenure-track positions of all types account for 68 percent of all faculty appointments in American higher education” (¶ 1).

Faculty overwhelmingly believed that policy affected quality issues and many also noted that those teaching online are held to higher standards than when they taught only face-to-face. As is found in the distance education literature, many of the faculty in this study agreed with their traditional faculty counterparts in that quality should not be comprised for

the modality of online learning (Bower, 2001; Dirr, 2003; Husmann & Miller, 2001; McCoy & Sorensen, 2003). Furthermore, some full-time faculty expressed their concern that course quality may be compromised when online courses are being taught solely by online faculty. These faculty and some of the faculty's peers believe that the level of quality is associated with the on-campus, full-time status.

Other faculty in this study – both full-time and contingent faculty – explained that the real tension is not that of compromising quality, rather that of job security for full-time faculty. The fear of full-time faculty regarding the increase of contingent online-only faculty is also discussed in the distance education participation literature (Dooley & Murphrey, 2000). The other concern regarding contingent faculty is that they often do not have an opportunity to participate in policy discussions. Kezar and Eckel (2004) recommend that institutions consider how to capitalize on the expertise of contingent faculty and how to include them in the policy process.

*Politics and Power.* The findings indicate that most faculty members do not believe that they have power to make changes and that this is due to the political nature of the state system of higher education and their faculty union. Although the faculty members in this study are unionized, many indicated a lack of authority (power) to make changes to policies except perhaps at the departmental level. The findings indicate the presence of a political policy making process in that there is a lack of input from faculty and student stakeholders and a lack of communication as to what policies are developed. Faculty alluded to being reactive to already established policies or finding out that a policy exists only once they have made a misstep or mistake. They believe that policy decisions generally take place at levels (system and institutional) of which they had limited access or awareness. Hearn (1998) alluded to this sentiment in higher education by broadly noting the power of high level administrators and external political constituents. He described this power by stating that “dominant political personalities can shape the agenda, discussion, and action in higher education” (p. 5).

Similarly, Certero and Wilson (2006) echo how policy makers can use their power “to keep items off the agenda” or “to educate others about their interests” (p. 96). Other areas of higher education governance literature note the benefit of involving faculty in policy making is a “sense of empowerment” they feel when participating in policy development (Alfred, 1998, p. 4). The issues of politics and power are important because they help determine which players will be involved, which voices will be heard and which interests will prevail (Certero & Wilson, 2006).

*Structure and History.* When discussing context and environment, faculty reflected on descriptions of structure as the various levels of policy development including policy set by the state system of higher education, the faculty union, the institutions, and the academic departments. Furthermore, findings reflected current distance education policies as “the way things have always been done” and faculty attitudes as apprehensive of change. Although fear of change is found in the distance education participation literature as a barrier, little to no discussion about the historical context around policy or the structural context around policy was found in the distance education policy literature. However, in discussions about distance education providers like the University of Phoenix, Hearn (1998) writes about changes in higher education and notes the importance of paying attention to context saying, “to sit back without being involved in assessing what this context means for institutions and systems, when higher education is not only our area of expertise but also our area of livelihood and an enduring and significant social institution, would be naïve and

unwise” (p. 6).

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations for distance learning administrators stem from the findings of this study: give faculty a voice, involve contingent faculty, provide faculty support, allow opportunities for student feedback, and consider the role of context.

### *Give Faculty a Voice*

Many institutions begin offering distance education courses or programs prior to developing distance education policies. For those institutions which already have such programs in place, the distance learning administrator should focus on creating an advisory group that allows various on-campus stakeholders the opportunity to provide policy recommendations and to offer feedback on programs and services. In addition to representation from the library and from the information technology division, administrators should invite faculty to the planning table as early in the process as possible.

Faculty invited to participate should have varying levels of distance teaching experience and each of the institution’s academic schools should have representation in this group. Whether it is through volunteering or through an appointment made by a school dean or provost, distance education administrators need to consider how faculty are invited to participate in the advisory group. Another consideration is to recognize those involved in the advisory group (i.e. through recognition for service, special opportunities for professional development, etc.), as these already very busy individuals will be taking time out of their schedules to attend and participate in advisory group meetings.

### *Involve Contingent Faculty*

Faculty governance typically takes place via on-campus, face-to-face gatherings which speaks to the culture and history of the institution and its faculty. The way in which these meetings are held could also be seen as a reflection of power and politics, as participation of many contingent faculty members—specifically those who are hired to teach solely online – is limited. The faculty discussions in this study reflect that contingent faculty members have rich perspectives to share and limited ways of doing so.

By using the technology to bridge this gap, contingent faculty could participate in on-campus meetings via video conferencing or via online conferencing. Online discussion boards are also a great way to keep contingent faculty involved in policy discussions. Furthermore, contingent faculty must communicate with full-time faculty and department chairs to ensure that their feedback is received and their voices are heard. Distance learning administrators should work with full-time faculty in examining ways to provide contingent faculty with a venue for participation in various policy development activities.

### *Provide Faculty Support*

A common theme throughout the faculty interviews in this study was the high level of enthusiasm faculty members have for online teaching. Administrators must provide faculty with the necessary support to foster that excitement and to increase faculty’s level of participation. This support includes offering faculty training and professional development,

recommending guidelines for teaching online, and providing release time recognizing increased workload and design time required.

Other areas of support include developing policies that address the issue of class size by ensuring that the number of students remains manageable for faculty and that present revenue sharing options to departments that offer distance education programs. Ensuring that faculty members have access to up-to-date technology, and actively promoting distance education programming to both internal and external audiences can reflect the administration's support for faculty and students in online programs.

#### *Allow Opportunities for Student Feedback*

Faculty and administrators should also encourage the representation of other stakeholders in the policy development process. Students, like faculty, are another group of stakeholders affected by distance education policy. Thus the shared experience of faculty and students will inform the policy making process. By having the student voice present at the policy making table, administrators and faculty may find that improved teaching, increased learning, and increased enrollments result. If distance education administrators are unable to have students present at advisory group meetings, they need to find alternate ways of providing the student perspective. This could be done by providing students with opportunities to offer feedback regarding online programming and services.

#### *Consider the Role of Context*

Distance education administrators must also consider the role of context – such as faculty type, power and politics, and structure and history as they relate to faculty involvement – in the policy development process. Consideration of campus culture, structural and historical context, as well as issues of politics and power influence the process and also affect those involved in the process – getting stakeholders involved and keeping stakeholders involved. Administrators must determine how they can move within their own institutional context to give faculty voice, involve contingent faculty, provide faculty support, and allow opportunities for student feedback.

### **Conclusion**

These recommendations are very much intertwined and taken separately or together can assist distance learning administrators in program development and growth. Once implemented, the results may include greater student advocacy, faculty support and sense of responsibility for the program, improved communication and understanding between administration and faculty and between full-time and contingent faculty, and increased levels of faculty participation in distance teaching. Additional research studying institutions that have involved faculty in the distance education policy development process could determine how and why faculty members were involved, what strategies were used to involve faculty, and how faculty involvement affected the policy development process.

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