
Creating Successful Professional Development Activities for Online Faculty: A Reorganized Framework

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Abstract

In the online environment, faculty engagement in the form of professional development takes on a new significance. Online programs hold strategic importance and growth opportunities for institutions, and therefore universities need faculty members who are engaged and effectively teaching in the online environment (Allen & Seaman, 2013, 2016; Dennis, 2013). Faculty professional development provides a vital component to overall faculty engagement and student success in the online environment. Extant research shows that when faculty members are active within the university, they are also likely to be engaged in the classroom (Drew & Klopper, 2014; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005.) Effective professional development specifically offered for online faculty needs to provide additional layers of support to help foster community, support faculty use of technologies, and meet university requirements (Meyer & Murrell, 2014). This paper presents a reorganized, more systematic professional development framework for online faculty that enhances virtual opportunities and support within the domains of personal considerations and interpersonal relationships (Caffarella & Zinn, 1999; Cervero & Daley, 2016). The approach developed in this paper reorients and extends an existing conceptual construct by placing greater emphasis on the development of a community of learning in order to help faculty develop strong pedagogical practice in teaching in order to both meet university requirements and foster increased student success.

1.1 Introduction

The popularity of online programs within higher education continues to grow among student populations. Likewise, online programs hold strategic importance and growth opportunities for institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2013, 2016; Dennis, 2013). However, recent studies have shown that although faculty are willing to teach online courses, overall acceptance of online course delivery as a modality yet remains relatively low (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Quinn, Mason, & Shelton, 2016). Furthermore, increasing focus on ways to provide time, opportunity, and interpersonal connections for virtual faculty to grow professional is needed (Caffarella & Zinn, 1999; Guskey, 2003). This has resulted in an increased need to develop successful professional development opportunities for online faculty that support faculty engagement and buy-in order to support student success in the online classroom environment.

The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate how creating a framework for online faculty professional development opportunities serves as a vital component of both faculty engagement and student success. While faculty acceptance and engagement is higher at institutions with more distance learning opportunities (Allen & Seaman, 2016), the overall goal of targeted professional development opportunities for online faculty is to foster a deeper investment to ensure quality and value of online courses offered. For the purpose of this paper, professional development refers to specialized trainings, continued education, or development of advanced professional skills undertaken by educators to improve overall knowledge and skill set.

The rationale for examining this topic includes two key factors; increasing faculty efficacy in the classroom and promoting student success within online programs. In addition to detailing the benefits of online professional

development, this paper will also address some of the challenges associated with developing opportunities that meet faculty needs and draw their interest. Rather than focus on a singular framework or model, this paper recommends utilizing a framework that blends measures specific to the organization, to teaching, and to developing a learning community in order to meet the unique needs of a virtual faculty population.

1.2 Faculty DO Matter: Keeping online faculty engaged and active in professional development via formal and informal methods

One of the key components of creating successful professional development for online faculty is the recognition that faculty DO matter. Extant research shows that when faculty are engaged within the university, they are also likely to be engaged in the classroom (Drew & Klopper, 2014; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). An important part of this is the recognition that both the faculty population and the overall student body have undergone a series of changes in the last ten years (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013). As class sizes grow and more students arrive underprepared for coursework, faculty seek a balance of activities that support both their own professional growth and their ability to meet student needs. (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Professional development opportunities must reflect these changes in order to be effective and engage faculty accordingly.

As noted by Baran and Correia (2014), the “quality of online programs in higher education is strongly correlated with how the professional development approaches respond to the needs of online teachers” (p. 96). Within higher education, professional development plays an important role in the work of faculty, and therefore in meeting the needs of students (Cervero & Daley, 2016). It serves to support good pedagogical (and/or andragogical/heutagogical) practice and allows for faculty to remain relevant within their respective area(s) of expertise. In the case of online faculty, there is a tertiary layer concerning technology that must be taken into consideration. Ideally, professional development opportunities for online faculty should incorporate a variety of offerings that support each of these sectors. Professional development offerings should include trainings and technology workshops, coaching/mentoring, targeted offerings for skill set deficits, and discipline based opportunities of scholarship (Kennedy, 2005; Meyer & Murrell, 2014).

Research during the last two decades also demonstrates that one of the ways that administrators and faculty developers can create and maintain an engaged and supported learning environment for faculty is by creating an informal community of practice (Kennedy, 2005; King, 2002; Wenger, 1998). Creating a community of practice helps faculty to become connected and active within online systems designed to support faculty. These communities are crucial for online faculty support and development as they focus on peer support and extend conversations beyond formal professional development opportunities (Baran & Correia; 2014; Rovai & Downey, 2009). By creating a less formal space for continued engagement and discourse among faculty, these communities allow for additional flow of knowledge and information. Faculty can continue the conversation, exchange ideas on topics pertinent to the community, and share experiences that lead to transformative practice (Kennedy, 2005; Poutiatine & Connors, 2012; Wenger, 2005).

1.3 Challenges and benefits of professional development for online faculty

It is important to recognize that online professional development does have benefits and challenges. In order to create successful professional development opportunities for online faculty, administrators and faculty developers should consider both the challenges and benefits. As different delivery methods have unique challenges and benefits, so do faculty. The goal is for the professional development offered to be transformational. As noted by Mezirow (1991) in his seminal work, learners need to interpret and then reinterpret their sense of the learning experience as it helps in sense making and future application. So while trainings and workshops are beneficial for technological and practical development, an overabundance of mandatory development can lead to disengaged faculty who receive the information but fail to apply it. They have the informational awareness, but not the desire to apply it (Baran & Correia; 2014; Mezirow, 1991; Tamin, 2016). They need that reflective component, that ability to build community and discuss what they have learned to go forward and apply the information. These components, the informal learning communities, are important and typically elective. However, if professional development is all on an elective basis, faculty may not select offerings that help increase skills sets specific to areas of deficit. As such, the model presented here proposes both formal and informal (potentially mandated/elective) opportunities to create an optimal balance for faculty.

An additional consideration is the way in which faculty wish to participate in professional development offerings. Options typically consist of on-site and off-site offerings designed to target faculty needs and interests (Caferella & Zin, 1999; Gueskey, 2003.) As Cervero and Daley (2016) stated: “This may include online courses, video conferencing, self-directed online study, podcasts, webinars, or online discussion groups (p. 15). However in the online community, considerations need to be reoriented to focus on modality of delivery rather than site/location. The current trend is toward shorter delivery formats (Cervero & Daley, 2016), and the virtual context allows such

flexibility. Including options for faculty professional development that are synchronous and/or asynchronous allows faculty to select the best fit for them. Synchronous meetings and offerings (live events) can benefit interactive learners, but create challenges for those who are time bound. Visual and auditory learners might appreciate interactive offerings that have options, the “click here to explore” effect. However for some faculty, interactive presentations might be confusing or technologically problematic. By offering a variety of different types of professional development offerings many of these challenges can be mitigated allowing faculty to benefit from a variety of options to fill professional development needs and requirements (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013; Gregory & Salmon, 2013).

Implementing faculty professional development opportunities that are high quality, have continued support, yield high impact results, produce faculty interaction, and respect faculty members busy schedules can be a challenge for administrators and program developers (Dade, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2009). According to Allen & Seaman (2013) as of 2012, 44.6% of academic leaders within administration recognize that teaching online courses requires more time and effort of faculty than traditional courses. As a result, providing well developed resources online that can be respectful of the demands on faculty members’ time is critical. Faculty members need to be able to engage in and complete training along their own time schedule, should have access to archived live sessions, and be able to repeat training if necessary.

In order for professional development to be fully successful for faculty, they need to feel supported and engaged. When faculty are well supported and actively engaged by their professional development opportunities, they seek to actively apply the information received, and apply the acquired skills to engage students in a way that fosters student success (Drew & Klopfer, 2014; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). With regard to online faculty, environment needs to be taken into context. Online professional development cannot be one-size-fits-all (Baran & Correia; 2014; Rovai & Downey, 2009). Professional development offerings also need to take into consideration the learning styles of faculty as students as well as faculty needs (O’Meara, Terosky, & Neumann, 2008; Rovai & Downey, 2009). Faculty need to feel like their individual needs, experiences, and identity as an online teacher are incorporated into their professional development activities for activities to move from informational to transformational (Poutiatine & Conners, 2012). As such, professional development activities should seek to reach this balance so that faculty can move from being passive participants receiving information, to active participants who learn, apply, transform, and lead.

1.4 Implications for Practice: A Framework for Creating Successful Professional Development Activities for Online Faculty

As noted by Austin & Sorcinelli (2013), faculty development is evolving - the students have changed, the faculty have changed, the challenges have changed. In order to meet the needs of faculty teaching online, utilization of a blend of professional development strategies is recommended. Baran and Correia (2014) recommend a professional development framework for online teaching that emphasizes three critical tiers of development: organizational, community, and teaching. This is demonstrated below in Figure 1.

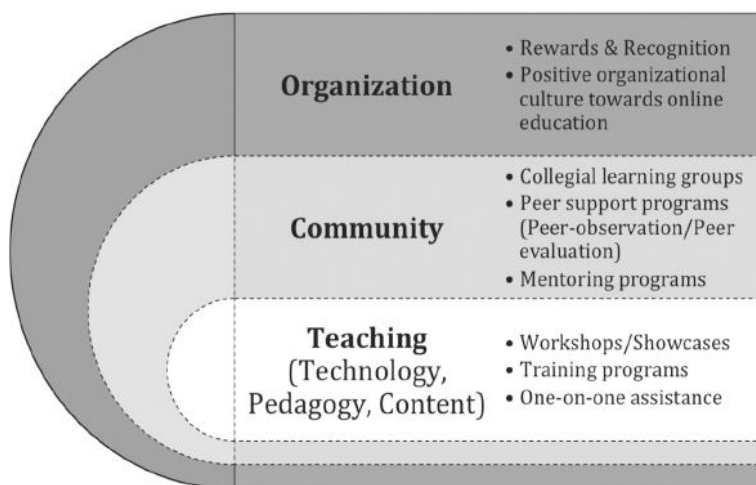


Figure 1. Professional development framework for online teaching

The approach developed in this paper utilizes this framework, but reorients and extends the conceptual construct

itself by placing greater emphasis on the development of a community of learning in order to help faculty develop strong pedagogical practice in teaching and ultimately foster increased student success while meeting organizational requirements. The framework provided here also includes examples of professional development activities that support each developmental level within the framework structure. This is demonstrated below in Figure 2.

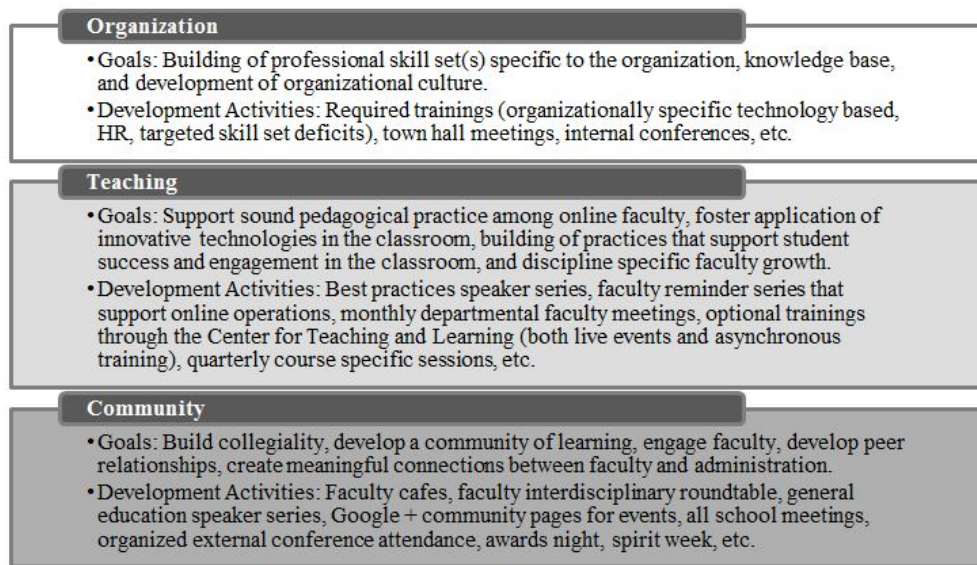


Figure 2. Reorganized professional development framework for online faculty

Attributes listed within the reorganized framework were derived from institutional initiatives that demonstrated measurable success across departments within a School of General Education at a large online institution. The listed goals and development activities are those observed to have success in faculty engagement via departmental data (faculty surveys and participation/attendance in listed activities), observed faculty participation in school wide communities and activities, faculty compliance in required organizational development trainings, as well as institutional data such as the university wide Faculty Engagement Survey. Goals listed reflect the application of Baran & Correia's (2014) process therein. Each of the listed development activities occur at three different levels: departmental, school, university. Faculty members participate in a variety of opportunities that range from those that are self-directed and voluntary (such as Google+ Communities) to those that are part of organized learning programs that are required (Human Resources (HR) trainings) (Baran & Correia, 2014; Cafferella & Zinn, 1999).

This process and subsequent model development occurred via a flexible and non-structured inductive process. Observations within the school of general education as discussed informally during leadership meetings revealed a pattern in practice. These meetings occur monthly and include the leadership within the School of General Education: the Dean, the Assistant Dean of Students, the Assistant Dean of Curriculum, as well as Department Chairs and Assistant Chairs. The leadership team noted that when faculty had increased opportunities to participate in informal learning communities focused on the creation of voluntary activities designed to develop meaningful connections and relationships, that faculty completion rates of required professional development activities improved. The connections developed during these informal interactions which included specific community based offerings such as faculty cafes (informal time to meet with department chair,) Google + community forums where faculty can share everything from teaching tips and tricks to their pets or children, and departmental activities such as book clubs and journal clubs, were directly observed to increase faculty engagement overall within the department and overall school. These activities along with their connections and the developing relationship were targeted initiatives discussed and shared monthly during departmental updates during the leadership meetings. As such, this reorganized framework restructures the organization of the professional development tiers in a way that reflects an emphasis on community being foundational to faculty engagement at each level as observed directly in all four departments within the School of General Education.

This shift reflects the understanding that when faculty members feel like they do matter and are part of a larger learning community, they become more focused on building skill sets and work to develop classroom atmosphere that foster student success (Cafferella & Zinn, 1999.) When applying this understanding in an online context, it becomes imperative to develop and create opportunities for the voluntary and informal connections typically created in physical campus setting. For example, required training assigned at an organizational level can be coupled with optional follow-up Q&A sessions during departmental meetings, and then application of techniques from the trainings can be discussed in a course specific context among faculty within course specific community forums. The

process as reoriented reflects Cervero, et.al.'s (2016) notion that professional development has both a social and professional agenda and that it can be complex, involving multiple goals, providers, and delivery methods. Within an online context, new opportunities must be presented that serve to build this layer of community with intention so that faculty feel connected and valued as professionals.

Key to success within this framework is providing faculty with options for professional development opportunities while maintaining certain parameters and then following up with targeted observation. This framework recognizes that some professional development activities cannot be optional due to the nature of the online environment, but also recognizes faculty as both adult learners and professionals who prefer to retain the ability to make decisions about their own online teaching (Baran & Correia, 2014; Poutiatine & Conners, 2012). As noted by Wilson and Cervero (2014), we are shifting from a model that examines time spent in professional development activities and focuses instead on the outcome of the activities. As such, successful professional development engages faculty in a way that helps build skills sets and increase knowledge as well as motivates them to take that information and apply it; thus transforming their classrooms and increasing student success. Blending of these three critical areas keeps professional development targeted and meaningful allowing faculty both choice and voice. The success of existing professional development activities and initiatives can then be measured via targeted classroom observations during annual reviews. Administrators can then use those reviews to gauge effectiveness of overall measures and adjust offerings accordingly.

1.5 Conclusion

When faculty members are engaged within the university, they are also likely to be engaged in the classroom and applying new techniques and innovations that support effective online teaching. While the formal aspects of the research are still taking shape, this model serves as the foundation for a new way to approach faculty development in the online context. Ultimately, development of this extended framework for online faculty professional development should help institutions organize activities in a way that creates meaningful opportunities for growth and development of all faculty members teaching online.

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