
Distance Education: Facing the Faculty Challenge

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Who could doubt that distance learning, in the multiple forms it takes today, is the hottest, sexiest, most controversial issue in American higher education? Hardly any issue of any higher education journal or newsletter is published that doesn't contain at least one article on the topic of distance learning or educational technology. We are bombarded constantly with messages heralding the technological revolution that is occurring on campuses across the country. As faculty, we are warned that if we don't "get with the program" our institutions will suffer and our jobs will be lost to more technologically, bottom-line oriented organizations such as the University of Phoenix.

College administrators increasingly put pressure on faculty to participate in distance learning and other technology related endeavors. Most faculty, however, have not responded as quickly and enthusiastically as administrators would like. For example, an article by *Wall Street Journal* reporter John D. McKinnon indicated that even at Florida Gulf Coast University, a university "built as a testing ground for Internet-based instruction" (1998, p.14c), faculty expressed serious concerns and reservations regarding the effectiveness of distance learning. A 1998-99 national study of faculty conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) stated that two-thirds of college and university faculty find that keeping abreast of information technology stressful, rating information technology above research/publishing demands, teaching load, and the tenure/promotion as a significant stressor (HERI, 1999) .

For a variety of reasons, faculty resist efforts to force them into distance learning. They resist individually or as a whole, often seeking the guidance of union representatives. While individual faculty members may have individual reasons to resist participating in the latest wave of distance education, there are several reasons why faculty in general resist distance education. Faculty have specifically expressed concern for the adequacy of institutional support, the change in interpersonal relations, and quality.

Institutional Support

All humans operate and are motivated by positive reinforcement. Faculty are no exception. How are faculty rewarded in higher education? Through salary, promotion/tenure, or adjusted workload. What does distance learning offer faculty in these areas?

Salary: Are faculty given any monetary incentive for their involvement with distance learning? A recent national survey conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) reported finding that 63 percent of distance learning faculty are compensated for a distance learning

course as if it were a normal course (NEA, 2000). Although it requires a major investment of time and energy for an instructor to create an engaging distance learning course, for many faculty moving a course from the traditional classroom into an electronic medium is considered part of the standard workload.

Promotion & tenure: At most institutions, tenure is awarded by achieving the institutionally approved balance of teaching, research, and service. Time spent in developing distance learning courses is time not spent on other professional activities which may be needed to be successful in the tenure process. This issue is particularly important for faculty at research universities who face high expectations in research and publication. As David Noble (1998) described in "Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education," the greatest pressures are often placed on the most vulnerable faculty, untenured or adjunct faculty, who must curry favor with administrators to reach their employment goals.

Workload: One incentive used by institutions to encourage faculty to get involved in institutional initiatives is workload adjustment. However the NEA study (2000) indicated that course reduction was not provided to the large majority (84 percent) of the faculty in its national survey. Perhaps this is because one of the reasons for expanding distance learning and use of educational technology is to increase productivity. If institutions provide release time to faculty preparing distance learning courses, they may need to demonstrate increased productivity through other means such as increased student-faculty ratio in distance learning classes.

Training: A National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 1997 report indicated that about 60 percent of higher education institutions provide training opportunities for distance learning faculty. This means that 40 percent of the institutions offering distance learning courses asked faculty to teach these courses without providing any special preparation for the experience. Of the 60 percent providing special training, about one quarter required faculty to have training in distance learning technology, 13 percent required training in curriculum development and 17 percent in teaching methods for distance learning. The NCES survey did not address the depth or extent of the training that was provided, an important consideration in the issue of instructor preparedness (NCES, 1998).

Faculty are accustomed to being the experts. Fear of appearing incompetent may cause faculty to resist involvement in any activity for which they have not had the proper training, including appearing on camera or conducting class via computer. Faculty may feel they have not been provided with adequate training or experience to competently manage teaching distance learning courses.

Changes in Interpersonal Relations

In a distance learning setting, instructors may have little or no knowledge of or contact with the audience as they prepare and deliver instructional lessons. A telecourse instructor who sits in a studio alone in front of a camera may have some idea of the target audience for the course, but has no way of knowing the ultimate purpose for which a given lecture will be used once it is "in the can." Teleclass instructors who teach their courses live, with or without a studio class, interact with students in a limited fashion within the studio/classroom and are restricted by the demands of the camera. Similarly the online instructors experience limited interaction with students whether the class is taught synchronously or asynchronously.

Most faculty are trained in "hand to hand" teaching. They expect and are accustomed to direct engagement with the students. The 2000 *American Faculty Poll* confirmed this in its finding that

one of the most important factors for faculty in their decision to pursue an academic career was the enjoyment of working with students (Sanderson, Phua, & Herda, 2000). In the traditional classroom, a skilled instructor will use her/his understanding of the audience, participant reactions monitored through observation of body language, verbal response, eye contact, etc. to create an effective learning experience. For some faculty teaching by distance learning, the lack of direct interpersonal contact with students is an issue. Faculty in the process of preparing "canned" telecourses or internet courses have no contact or feedback to help them gauge the clarity of their communications. Student feedback in distance learning is often delayed and indirect. The majority of faculty interactions with students will be on an individual basis through technologies such as phone, fax and computer. Even instructors in interactive distance learning situations face limited interpersonal contact, and must readjust the manner in which they assess the response and understanding of students. Rarely will there be the opportunity for "hand to hand" interaction with students learning at distant sites.

Personal interaction with students is one of the most gratifying aspects of teaching. An opportunity to see the spark of understanding begin to glow in the eyes of a student who has been struggling with a concept, to see confidence build, these are the "big payoffs" of teaching for many instructors. The technology interface of distance learning often denies them this opportunity.

The Quality Question

The issue of quality appears throughout the distance learning literature. Concerns have been expressed by both proponents and opponents of distance learning. Instructional innovations always face the challenge of demonstrating they do not negatively impact the quality of instruction. Innovations should enhance quality. At minimum, the experience of a distance learning student should be as rich, both intellectually and affectively, as the experience of a student in a traditional classroom. Given the additional resources needed to develop distance learning courses, the expectation should be an enhanced experience, not a weakened substitute for the traditional classroom.

In higher education, quality of instruction is measured in many ways. Quality must include access to resources such as library, labs, and faculty. Quality should also include life experiences designed for student socialization and affective development via student-to-student interaction. Both of these quality issues are areas in which distance learning has been vulnerable to criticism.

The NCES (1998) distance education study addressed this issue in its study and found that "Access to instructors in some form was generally available to students". In 42 percent of institutions, distance learning instructors visited remote sites on occasion. Toll-free telephone, e-mail, or other online access were also methods for instructor access. Access to library resources varied depending on the type of resource. Access to an electronic link with the institution's library was available at 56 percent of the institutions. Cooperative agreements for students to use the libraries of other agencies was available at 62 percent of the institutions. At 45 percent of the colleges and universities, library staff were assigned specifically to assist distance education students, while special deposit collections of library materials were available at remote sites for students at 39 percent of institutions (NCES, 1998). However at best, somewhere between 35-45 percent of distance education students were not provided with institutional support resources that would be available to on-campus students.

Students learn from other students. Emphasis on student-to-student interaction through group tasks and cooperative activities has increased as we move from a teaching to a learning paradigm.

The importance of creating student learning communities is widely recognized (Sutherland, 1996; Tinto, 1997). But what student interactions can be created in the distance education environment? Is the quality of interaction the same?

A variety of methods have been used to create a sense of community for distance education students. Some are as basic as organizing and sharing student contact information, while others involve using the technology to create chat spaces in web-based courses. Is the quality equivalent? Data on this issue is still being gathered. It is clear, however, that to create an equivalent experience in the distance education environment requires more planning on the part of the instructor and more effort on the part of the student. The issue of community continues to be an element of concern for faculty as they contemplate how to provide a quality learning experience in a distance education setting.

In summary, distance education technologies create a major change in the way instruction is delivered. They require new skills for both the instructor and the student. They shift the educational experience from teacher-centered to learner-centered. Instructors become more facilitators, intermediaries between the students and the resources they need for their own independent study. These changes challenge faculty and may trigger insecurities.

Technology has the potential to address many of higher education's challenges. To gain acceptance for and create quality learning experience in distance education technology, administrators must move beyond the "build it and they will come" mentality and acknowledge the faculty perspective, developing strategies that will encourage faculty participation in distance education. Almost 60 percent of the current higher education faculty are over the age of 45. Most have taught a number of years in the traditional classroom setting. To elicit faculty support and involvement, distance education administrators need to be skillful change agents, enticing faculty participation in distance education by providing appropriate incentives for faculty involvement and instructional support to make faculty as comfortable as possible in the transition to a new instructional medium.

In its publication "Quality on the Line," the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) established twenty-four quality benchmarks for success in Internet distance education efforts (IHEP, 2000). The four benchmarks specifically addressed to faculty issues are applicable to any distance education setting. The benchmarks support availability of and encouragement to use technical assistance in course development, assistance in transition to the new distance environment, and continued assistance and training through the progression of the course. Addressing these issues was deemed essential for quality distance education.

There are a variety of strategies that can be used to address these issues and to stimulate faculty involvement in distance education efforts. An important key is open communication. Faculty should be represented throughout the planning and implementation stages of distance education efforts. Participatory management practices will elicit faculty input and keep faculty informed of distance education efforts as they evolve on the campus. Some campuses have created within the faculty governance structure technology committees that oversee and/or advise in planning campus educational technology initiatives, including distance education. Others incorporate these discussions into already established faculty-driven curriculum committees. When faculty are involved in the decision-making regarding distance education, their concerns about the quality of the distance education experience can be lessened.

Institutional support for faculty involvement in distance education is essential and should take a variety of forms to recognize the range of motivations and needs of faculty. Clearly the literature

indicates that distance education classes require more faculty time than traditional courses. Institutions should recognize this and incorporate appropriate compensations when planning distance education initiatives. A number of institutions have found that special upgrades in office computer equipment are a well-received compensation for distance education faculty, as are adjusted salary and courseload. Recent investigations have indicated that low-cost incentives such as public recognition, notes of appreciation, or special parking privileges, are also effective demonstrations of support.

The availability of adequate and effective training is also a requirement for the institution that intends to embark on distance education initiatives. Faculty development workshops to introduce faculty to distance education technology and to the changes in pedagogical approach needed to effectively conduct distance education classes are a must. Through these types of workshops, faculty can learn, among other things, strategies to improve the interpersonal dimension of distance learning, a concern of many educators. While a number of institutions may provide faculty training in distance education technology, at least one southeastern university has combined compensation and training. Without requiring an up-front commitment to teach an online course, this institution provides stipends for faculty to participate in a six-week summer workshop which teaches them how to construct and conduct online courses. This enables interested faculty to explore the online environment and make a well informed decision regarding its appropriateness for the courses they teach. By conducting the workshops in the summer, the institution provides the opportunity when more faculty may have the time to participate.

Faculty are not recalcitrant Luddites. Many have simply been disillusioned by previous technologies touted as innovations that would alter the course of education. Faculty are exhibiting healthy skepticism when they resist the call to jump on the latest educational bandwagon before assessing how this new technology will help students learn.

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