
Tips for Administrators in Promoting Distance Programs Using Peer Mentoring

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Abstract

In this exploratory distance mentor/ mentee program implemented fall 2005 at the University of West Georgia , the authors investigated strategies that worked in motivating faculty to put their face-to-face classes online. This paper provides an overview of the program, its successes, problem areas, and tips for administrators to adopt in designing successful distance mentoring programs.

Introduction

Quality online courses that are interactive, well designed and implemented, and taught by knowledgeable faculty are in demand today by graduate students across the nation. Students are actively seeking institutions that deliver educationally sound programs that meet their diverse and varying needs yet offer them convenience and flexibility given their time and/or distance constraints. The number of higher education institutions that offer online courses has grown significantly (Allen & Seaman, 2005; Maguire, 2005). Carr-Chellman strongly believe online education is the fastest growing market segment of adult education today and that growth expectations in the future are extraordinary (2005). As a result students have a variety of choices in selecting online institutions and courses that best meet their educational and personal needs. Competition for online students in higher education institutions has begun and now crosses many state lines.

Online classes, however, if not delivered effectively can have high drop out rates due to a wide variety of reasons such as insufficient feedback from the instructor, technical difficulties, and/or poor course design. (Muirhead & Betz, 2002, Pickar & Wheatlye, 2001) Institutions delivering online courses must take the necessary steps to ensure their courses, whether they are partially or totally online, meet accreditation standards, and are taught by well trained instructors who have the knowledge and skills to effectively engage learners and teach online courses. In addition, support must be in place for faculty and students at the library, distance office, and technology services. It is imperative that faculty and students receive advanced training on how to effectively function in the online environment if they are going to be successful. Online courses require participants to take on new and different teaching/ learning behaviors. Course management and design, the delivery of materials, communicating with students through the use of multimedia, providing an interactive online environment, and the way in which course participants use instructional technology within the course is different from traditional face-to-face instruction (Kosak, Manning, Dobson, Rogerson, Cotnam, Colaric & McFadden, 2004).

To better prepare faculty how to design, implement, and evaluate online courses, many institutions are now investing in distance mentoring programs (Helton & Helton, 2005; Mandernach, Donnelly, Dailey, & Schulte, 2005). In addition to the traditional distance orientation program delivered to new distance instructors by the Distance Office staff, faculty are being provided with an experienced distance mentor. The mentor's responsibility is to assess the mentee's specific teaching/ learning needs and then deliver additional one-to-one training to enhance the mentee's knowledge and skills where growth is needed. As problems emerge the mentor also works with the mentee to problem solve in a timely manner. As a result of the mentoring program mentees feel more highly supported and quickly advance their distance teaching skills.

Overview of the Program

The College of Education has offered distance courses using a variety of technologies since 1995. This has included GSAMS, WebCT, Horizon Wimba, and web pages. Faculty training has been provided predominantly by the Distance Office on a wide variety of topics to try to prepare faculty to effectively teach online. Emphasis has been placed on faculty starting to use the distance platform with a few classes then gradually adding more class sessions as the instructor's knowledge and skills increase. Over the past five years there has been an increase in the use of WebCT by departments and the degree to which classes are put online. One department in the COE has all of its classes online 85% or more at the graduate level. Three departments offer classes that are 95-100% online at the graduate level.

In an effort to infuse online instruction into more classes in the College of Education (COE) to meet the changing needs of students and increase our student enrollments, a distance mentoring program was designed and implemented during the 2005-2006 academic year. The Dean of the COE and the Chair of the Department of Media and Instructional Technology initiated the program. The goal of this program was simply to gradually increase the number of online class meetings using WebCT to deliver instruction across the graduate curriculum by enticing new distance instructors to start to use this teaching/learning format through a distance mentoring program utilizing experienced distance instructors to guide them through the process. As a result students in newly created online sessions would have greater flexibility in their learning, a significantly reduced amount of time spent on the road driving to and from campus, increased opportunities to access online materials, and an opportunity to improve their technology skills and communication.

At the onset of the program the mentor was to review the mentee's course syllabi, suggest one to two classes where online instruction could be added to the traditional face-to-face class, discuss this with the mentee to determine if this was feasible or not, and then help the faculty member design and add the needed instructional materials for these sessions to be placed online. Faculty were only asked to put a few class meetings online fall semester so they could gradually get acquainted with effective online course design and instruction. If they wanted to put more class meetings online they could do so but the maximum pay would remain the same. The payment for reviewing the course syllabi to determine which class sessions were most appropriate for the online format was \$100 for both the mentor and mentee. The fee for the mentee designing and putting one class online was \$200. If two class meetings were put online the mentee received \$400. The mentors were funded \$300 for each class meeting they helped place online. The maximum pay was \$600 for two class meetings per mentee.

The Chair of the MIT Department was appointed as the Coordinator of the mentoring program by

the Dean. The Dean sent out an e-mail to faculty informing them of the program and asking them to complete an online survey if they were interested in being a distance mentee or serving as a mentor. The forms were returned to the Coordinator who read and analyzed them and then assigned mentors to mentees based on personal requests, department, and subjects taught. The pairs of mentor-mentee assignments were reviewed and approved by the Dean and then distributed via e-mail.

Assessment of the Program

To assess the program formative and summative assessment instruments that consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions, were administered. Data revealed the program was successful in accomplishing its goal of slowly adding online classes to the curriculum. Of the 32 face-to-face classes that faculty identified as those they wanted to transform a minimum of at least one to two class meetings online, only one class was unsuccessful in meeting the goal. The program had a 97% success rate its first semester, which means it met its initial goals extensively, which means it met its initial goals extensively. The faculty member who was not able to put any classes online had unforeseen personal difficulties during the semester and could not complete the work due to lack of time.

Table 1 below summarizes the number of class meetings faculty placed online in their individual classes fall semester. It is interesting to note that class meetings ranged from 17 meetings, the entire class was put online, to 1 meeting online. The faculty member who put the whole class online was an experienced distance instructor using Blackboard but needed mentoring to put her class online using WebCT fall semester. Another mentee was highly motivated, learned online course design and techniques quickly, and placed over half of her graduate class online to provide more course access to students. Two additional faculty members placed 40-50% of their classes online. The vast majority of the participants in the mentoring program, 71%, placed two class meetings online which was the goal of the distance mentor/mentee program.

Table 1. The Number of COE Classes Having Online Class Meetings Added Fall Semester 2005

# of Class Meetings Put Online	Number of Classes	Percent of Classes
• 17 class meetings (100% online class)	1	3.2%
• 10 or more class meetings (54% - 94%)	0	0
• 9 or more class meetings (53%)	1	3.2%
• 8 class meetings (40-50%)	2	6.5%
• 6 to 7 class meetings (30-39%)	0	0

• 4 to 5 class meetings (20-29%)	3	9.7%
• 2 to 3 class meetings (10-19%)	22	71%
• 1 class meeting (5-9%)	2	6.5%
Total # of Classes	31	100%

Data from the summative survey revealed both mentors and mentees found the program valuable. Based on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 indicating “Strongly Agree” and 5 representing “Strong Disagree”, distance mentors reported they met the distance education needs of their distance mentees ($X= 1.48$, Strongly Agree/Agree). They also reported the mentoring program enhanced their distance knowledge, skills, and perceptions as a mentor ($X=1.52$, Strongly Agree/ Agree). Distance mentees revealed their mentors were very successful in helping them learn useful teaching strategies that helped them successfully put their face-to-face class meetings online so their students would be provided with positive, meaningful, interactive learning experiences. Mentors also revealed the training program was helpful to them for a number of reasons such as improving their technology skills, having more interactive online meetings and training sessions with the Distance Office and mentoring program, learning about online course design principles, and discussing with their mentors the value of online courses. Since the program was so well received by the distance faculty, the Dean continued the mentoring program into the spring and next academic year.

Thirty-six faculty members participated in the distance mentoring program fall semester. They represented all six departments in the College of Education . Sixteen faculty members requested to be mentored and agreed to the contract of adding one to two online classes to their face-to-face class. Twenty experienced distance instructors agreed to serve as mentors. The vast majority of the mentors had at least four years experience teaching and designing online classes and came from the Media and Instructional Technology, Educational Leadership and Professional Studies, and Curriculum and Instructional departments. Nine of the 20 mentors, (45%), taught courses that were more than 51% online fall semester while 11, (55%), taught courses that were less than 51% online. Most of the mentees were new to the online format and had little or no previous experience teaching and/or designing online classes. Three mentees did not have classes listed as WebCT classes fall semester, so they didn't use WebCT as a means of online instruction; 14 used WebCT with their classes less than 51%, and 2 faculty members used WebCT 51% or more with their fall graduate classes. All of the mentees, regardless of their diverse backgrounds and experiences, elected to put one to two class meetings online fall semester and signed a written contract indicating their willingness to do so with the assistance of distance mentors. All but one mentee was successful in meeting this goal and all continued with the program spring semester.

Spring semester 2006 the program almost doubled. The number of mentees, despite the loss of two faculty members from the fall semester, jumped to 30. Those serving as distance mentors dropped from 20 to 16, a 25% decline. As a result a staff member from the Distance Education Office was recruited and added as a mentor spring semester. Faculty members put 212 class meetings online that were traditionally taught face to face. This is almost double the productivity of fall semester. Table 2 below provides an overview of the participants in the program.

Table 2. Demographics of Participants in Mentor / Mentee Program

Demographic Information/ Semester	Fall 2005	Spring 2006
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of Mentees in Program 	16 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Females = 11 • Males = 7 	30 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Females = 23, • Males = 7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of Mentors in Program 	20 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Females = 15 • Males = 5 	16 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Females = 12 • Males = 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Departments participating 	6 (All)	6 (All)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentee Use of WebCT with Class at beginning of semester 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No use of WebCT = 3 • Less than 51% = 14 • More than 51% = 2 	Data unavailable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor Use of WebCT with Class at beginning of semester 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 51% = 11 • More than 51% = 9 	Data unavailable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of Classes impacted by the Program <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undergraduate Classes • Graduate Classes 	31 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 Undergraduate • 22 Graduate 	39 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undergraduate • 29 Graduate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of Face-To-Face Class Sessions Put Online 	112 class sessions	216 class sessions

Successes of the Program

During the fall semester 112 face-to-face classes were put online with 31 different classes. There was significant variability across the mentees. The number of class meetings put online ranged from 0 to 17. One mentee placed all of her class online while another mentee had personal problems develop during the semester and was not able to add one online class to her

face-to-face class due to lack to time.

The training program for mentees provided many options for participants. It began with e-mail communications from the program coordinator that contained e-readings and documents and progressed to workshops in the College of Education, informal lunches where sharing of what worked and did not work was discussed, to posted web pages. The Distance Education Office also conducted workshops for interested participants during the program on a variety of topics. Some of the other successes of the program can be listed as following:

- Mentees technology knowledge and skills associated with online instruction greatly increased during the training program. As a result new distance instructor's confidence levels also appeared to increase and their enthusiasm towards using distance technology for their classes.
- Many distance mentors reported their teaching and course design skills improved during the program based on additional training, reviewing previous skills, and locating information to share with their mentees.
- The socialization between COE mentees and mentors and other distance instructors on campus significantly progressed. More interactive activities have become available such as formal and informal sharing luncheons, training presentations, and/or one-to-one training sessions. Mentees found informal discussions with their mentors especially useful.
- More distance collaboration has begun to take place in the COE as evidence by collaboration presentations from faculty across departments. In addition, faculty in a number of departments have been involved in the planning and delivering of distance share and tell luncheons where success stories of "what worked well during the mentoring process."
- The mentoring program has shown rapid growth. Nine new participants were added during the spring semester, a 30% increase. Each was interested in working on one online course during the program. Spring term mentees were interested in adding online components to 30 classes, a 43.3% increase from the previous semester. The number of class meetings placed online increased by 48%. The number of classes placed online during the year was 328.
- To enable the participants to add audio to PowerPoint presentations, the Dean purchased and distributed headsets to all mentees and mentors. His future plans are to provide iPods to interested faculty for use in creating audio course content.

Mentoring Program Challenges

The COE mentor and mentee program has also faced some challenges the first semester it has been implemented. Some of these challenges can be attributed to the novelty of the experience as the college has never been part of a mentoring program before. Also, inexperience in the pedagogy of the distance education environment for some of the participants of the program made it difficult to make fast transitions from traditional instruction to distance. Some of the other challenges are listed below:

- Due to the growth in the program it was difficult to find a sufficient number of highly skilled mentors to meet the growing needs of distance mentees.

- Continuing the funding for the second semester of the mentoring program at the same rate was a challenge due to the growth in the program. The Dean had to increase the amount of funds made available.
- Some individuals submitted requests late. As a result additional mentors, who had high level skills and knowledge in distance instruction, had to be located to deliver the needed training to these mentees since assignments had already been made for the semester.
- Assigning mentors to mentees was not always successful in that some mentors and mentee skills were more and less developed than self-reported. The formative and summative assessment instruments were valuable in making needed adjustments for future assignments.
- Both formative and summative instruments were focused on improving mentee skills. In the future, the skills that mentors gained as a result of mentoring program will be investigated closely.

Tips for Administrators

Administrators have important roles in the success of distance mentoring programs. Based on two-semester long experiences in the implementation of such a program at the University of West Georgia , the following suggestions should provide administrators with important tips about implementing similar program successfully:

- It is imperative that administrators overseeing distance education mentoring programs be familiar with effective teaching/ learning practices in order to make appropriate decisions about the program, especially the assignments of mentors and mentees.
- Distance mentees must build for success as a distance instructor by putting only a few classes online until his/her knowledge and skill level expands and is to the point where he/she can effectively handle a larger percent of the class online. Effective online instruction takes time and practice to learn. Starting with a large percent of the class online tends to lead to ineffective teaching, a frustrated class, and an overall bad impression about online instruction experienced by students.
- Highly successful face-to-face instructors should be selected as online instructors. If an individual is ineffective in the face to face environment, then it is unlikely that they will facilitate effective online mentoring.
- Assigning mentors to mentees who have similar work time availability and content expertise when possible is important to the success of the mentoring program.
- It is vital to provide structure during the mentoring program so that participants know what is expected of them. This can be accomplished by sending and posting the information in a variety of places such as mailing the information, e-mailing the information, and/or having the information available at a web site.
- Build collaboration into the mentoring program where participants can get together to share information with one another such as what techniques have been effective in the online classroom, or what did not work. This could take place at informal lunches, share and tell

workshops during the semester.

Future Directions

Most mentoring programs aim at developing scholarships and actions in a certain area, in our case, distance education. It is important to establish roles mutually between mentor-mentees, and administrators and participants of the distance mentoring program. In this regards, the formative and summative evaluation instruments will provide important data for the administrators of the program. The authors' contention is that mentoring program will facilitate and drive new thinking in the College with regard to the unlimited possibilities of distance education and its potential to change the future of access to graduate programs as well as graduate programming.

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