

Faculty Perceptions and Participation in Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of distance education has recognized the need for a change and modification of the faculty role in teaching at a distance (Jones, Lindner, Murphy & Dooley, 2002; Kanuka, Collett & Caswell, 2002; Miller & Pilcher, 2001). While technological advancements are an important part of the distance-learning environment, basic changes in teaching methods, technique, and motivation are needed to make distance education more effective (Purdy & Wright, 1992). Many studies cite faculty resistance to instructional technology as a primary barrier to the continued growth of distance education programs (Jones et al., 2002; McNeil, 1990). McNeil (1990) noted that attitudinal issues related to how faculty perceive and interact with technology are a bigger barrier to adoption and diffusion of distance education than is technology infrastructure.

BACKGROUND

This chapter addresses perceptions of faculty with respect to barriers to adoption, roles and responsibilities, competencies, and rewards. Barriers stem from the lack of perceived institutional support (faculty rewards, incentives, training, etc.) for course conversion to distance education formats (O'Quinn & Corry, 2002; Perreault et al., 2002). As distance education programs continue to proliferate globally, colleges and universities must commit to address the needs of faculty (McKenzie, Mims, Bennett & Waugh, 2000). Despite the fact that much of the

literature in distance education discusses the importance of faculty, this group has been largely neglected by the research.

Dooley and Murphy (2000) found that faculty members lacked experience in teaching learners at a distance and that they were much more confident in their technical competence than they were in their methodological ability to use modern technologies in their teaching. These authors further found that faculty perceived training and assistance in the use of instructional technologies to be less available than equipment and facilities. Additionally, faculty members who had not participated in distance education perceived the level of support as lower than those who had taught classes at a distance. The ability of an organization to adapt to these changes is influenced by the following: competence, or the knowledge, skills, and abilities of its staff; value, or the amount of importance the staff places on the role of these technologies to accomplish teaching and learning; information technology support, or the availability of high quality facilities, equipment, technical support, and training (Dooley & Murphy, 2000).

Lindner, Murphy, and Dooley (2002) extended these conclusions by looking at how these factors affect faculty adoption of distance education. Research revealed that faculty members lacked confidence in their ability to use technology in their teaching, perceived technology to be a valuable addition to the teaching and learning environment, and believed the overall level of support for the use of technology in teaching to be low. Tenure status and academic rank/position for tenure-track faculty were inversely related to overall distance education scores. Non-tenured assistant professors had the highest overall

distance education scores and the highest competency scores.

Students learn from competent instructors who have been trained how to communicate effectively through technology. Thomas Cyrs (1997) identified areas of competence important to a distance education environment: course planning and organization, verbal and nonverbal presentation skills, collaborative teamwork, questioning strategies, subject matter expertise, involving students and coordinating their activities at field sites, knowledge of basic learning theory, knowledge of the distance learning field, design of study guides, graphic design and visual thinking (Cyrs, 1997).

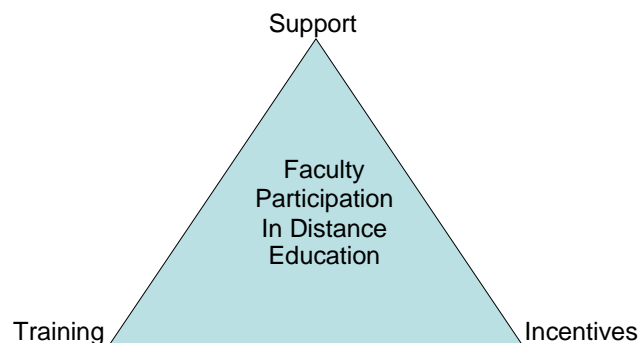
Linda Wolcott (1997) conducted an analysis of the institutional context and dynamics of faculty rewards at research universities. She discovered that 1) distance education occupies a marginal status, 2) distance teaching is neither highly valued nor well rewarded as a scholarly activity, 3) distance teaching is not highly related to promotion and tenure decisions, and 4) rewards for distance teaching are dependent on the academic unit's commitment to distance education.

As indicated by Moore (1997), distance education programs with a commitment to faculty support and training result in higher quality programs. As the complexity continues and the desire to integrate distance education programs expands, attention must be given to faculty training and support.

Enhancing Faculty Participation

Overall, faculty members recognize that distance education technologies are—and will be—an important part of the instructional process. However, they perceive support and training to be less available than equipment. Enhancing faculty participation requires that resources be directed to provide adequate levels of support and training such that these technologies are used for the benefit of students (Howard, Schenk & Discenza, 2004).

Figure 1. Enhancements to increase faculty participation in distance education.



It is the integration of incentives, training, and support that promote the adoption of distance education delivery strategies by university faculty.

While faculty recognize the potential, intervention strategies are necessary to alter how people perceive and react to distance education technologies. It is apparent that steps must be taken to increase faculty training and support. Three major areas require consideration: 1) support, 2) training, and 3) incentives. Support extends beyond "verbal" to providing the support/professional staff to assist faculty. Training should not only include technology exposure, but instructional design, pedagogy/andragogy, and "cook-book" strategies and "how-to" manuals. By providing incentives such as release time, mini-grants, continuing education stipends, and recognition in the promotion and tenure process, faculty will have more than verbal encouragement to continue, or begin, using distance education technologies and will have the reason to do so (Dooley & Murphrey, 2000; Murphrey & Dooley, 2000).

Rockwell et al. (1999) found that the primary incentives for faculty participation were *intrinsic* or personal rewards, including the opportunity to provide innovative instruction and apply new teaching techniques. Other incentives included extending educational opportunities beyond the traditional institutional walls, and release time for faculty preparation.

FUTURE TRENDS AND CONCLUSION

Faculty member participation in distance education requires a competence in using technology, an attitude that distance education is important and valuable, and access to quality infrastructure (Hawkes & Coldeway, 2002). Faculty roles and responsibilities must change to accommodate the use of these technologies and it must be recognized that teaching at a distance requires a different set of competencies (Richards, Dooley & Lindner, 2004). Integration of distance education technologies into the teaching and learning process requires a shift of attitude on the part of the faculty members and the removal of barriers created by the lack of institutional support.

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