

Chapter 29

Professional Development for Online Educators: Problems, Predictions, and Best Practices

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ABSTRACT

A professional development program for online faculty members can be difficult to create, implement, and sustain. Its components will vary depending on the location of the online faculty, the institutional budget, and who is administering the program. A professional development program is essential if institutions wish to keep instructors up-to-date on technological advances and pedagogical shifts as online classrooms change. Today's online faculty members are inundated with "information overload" due to the internet and because information is increasing exponentially, which results in pressure to "keep up" (Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003). Because of this pressure and the proliferation of learning tools, institutions need to help faculty filter and use the information available to them. This chapter will focus on essential components of professional development programs, issues and potential solutions, examples from successful programs, and future trends in online professional development.

BACKGROUND

Research shows online faculty members need adequate preparation to teach online (Muirhead & Betz, 2002; Velez, 2010). Once the faculty member is trained and has taught his or her first

course, what can be done to ensure that the faculty member remains adequately informed about new technologies, techniques, and ideas in distance learning? If institutions want their online learning programs to grow, they must depend on the engagement of their faculty members to provide students with quality instruction, as they are the primary source of success for any online learning

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initiatives (Tabata & Johnsrud, 2008). Research shows that even though someone is a good teacher in a classroom, that person might struggle in the online learning environment if they are unfamiliar with technology-enhanced learning tools and environments (Howell, Williams, Lindsay, & Laws, 2004). Technology is only one area upon which faculty members' success is contingent in the online environment.

Online faculty members need support from their institutions on a continual basis (Shapiro, 2006). Unfortunately, scant literature exists on online faculty development programs (Taylor & McQuiggan, 2008) and guidelines for developing them. Having a robust faculty development program as well as a group of skilled faculty members are aspects of a quality online learning program (US Department of Education, 2006; North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Higher Learning Commission, 2007).

Despite the lack of literature on established faculty development programs for online instructors, some best practices are mentioned, as well as reasons why institutions should make continual development a priority on their campus. Unfortunately, opportunities for university-sponsored professional development for online instructors seem to be limited (Bennett, Priest & Macpherson, 1999). What is known is that a permanent, always-accessible development program should be created that is rich in material, but also rich with collaboration and communication for the instructors (Serdiukov, Niederhauser & Reynolds, 2000). A campus has a unique opportunity to promote a *community of practice* for its online faculty through collegial sharing (McQuiggan, 2007). This chapter will share evidence that online faculty need and want professional development (McKenzie, Mims, Bennett, and Waugh, 2000; Velez, 2010), discuss examples of successful professional development programs, and provide guidance to those who wish to implement a sustainable, scalable professional development for online faculty.

Technology and Constant Change

Professional development opportunities for online faculty might cover various subject areas such as student issues, testing integrity, instructor involvement, assessment, and other pedagogical concerns; however, the one area of professional development that is needed most for faculty members who teach online is technology. Technology has profoundly affected everyone's lives and has changed the culture of education, the university, and learning environments where information is created and delivered (Appana, 2008; McFarlane, 2011). The main reason why technology should be part of any professional development program is its swiftly changing nature. Not only is technology changing teaching, it is changing the nature of research-and the way we communicate inside and outside the "classroom" (Schneckenberg, 2009).

The rapid rate of technological change does not impact traditional, face-to-face instructors as greatly as it does online instructors because their students are using some form of technology to learn and access information every hour of every day. Technology has drastically changed the landscape of learning and the expectations placed upon faculty members (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Online instructors are significantly affected, as they are deep within the trenches of the technological world, teaching in the cloud versus a classroom.

Learning *basic* technologies to teach online should occur during initial preparation (Velez, 2010), but teaching with more advanced technology tools requires practice (Weaver, Robbie, & Borland, 2008). The faculty members who are technologically savvy typically practice and try new technologies. These faculty members might have some advantages over those who have been resistant or who refuse to utilize it. For example, using technology can empower faculty members and increase their self-confidence levels (Tabata & Johnsrud, 2008). Increasing self-confidence

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