

Faculty Support Systems

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INTRODUCTION

One factor that has led institutions to develop online learning programs is the perception that they have lower production costs than campus-based courses, particularly as the numbers of students increase. Hülsmann (2004) noted that this view was a significant tenet in the argument supporting distance learning in developing nations. Specifically, he described the common belief that “distance education is able to deal with large numbers more cost-effectively than traditional education, and has proved to do so also in developing countries” (Introduction section, paragraph 3).

To one extent, this is a valid viewpoint. Unlike earlier distance education approaches, such as print-based correspondence courses and full-motion videoconferencing, online learning doesn’t require the purchase of high-cost specialized equipment such as videoconferencing rooms or publishing systems. Although there are numerous examples of institutions spending far more per course than traditional programs—NYUonline was rumored to have spent upwards of \$1 million per course (Maeroff, 2003)—a motivated instructor can create and publish components of a Web-based course on a personal computer and then upload the materials to a free Web hosting service and instantly teach online to students anywhere in the world. The relative ease of creating Web-based materials, however, can mask larger challenges that face online education providers. Providing effective online faculty support is one area that can be easily overlooked with such a myopic view of online course development.

BACKGROUND

While there has been a significant amount of literature addressing pedagogical aspects of online learning, comparably, little has specifically addressed faculty sup-

port issues, although Tait and Mills (2002) is a notable exception. In Berge and Mrozowski’s (2001) review of distance education research from 1990 to 1999, they found that the quantity of literature addressing learner support, operational issues, and policy and management issues lagged behind more frequently addressed topics such as design issues, learner characteristics and pedagogical strategies to increase interactivity and active learning.

While universities regularly spend millions of dollars erecting new buildings to support campus-based instruction, comparably, little consideration is usually given to the structural support and service needs of Web-based programs. Whether this is a deliberate budgetary decision to keep online learning expenses down or an oversight prompted by the relative ease in which Web-based courses can be created, institutions would be wise to consider the need for quality support services. Moore and Kearsley (2005) proposed a systems model that considered all of the component processes that make up education, with the recognition that the different processes interact and influence one another. They noted that the addition of technology into the education represented a significant change, and the educational system must be adjusted accordingly. “Investing in technology without regard to the other subsystems is a recipe for mediocrity at best, for disaster at worst” (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p. 19).

Palloff and Pratt (2001) stated that institutions failing to develop an adequate faculty and student support infrastructure will eventually encounter significant problems. In a survey of online students at one university, support services were ranked in the top five issues (Aggarwal, 2001; Legon, 2002). In response to such concerns, Baker, Aggarwal and Schihl (2003) proposed the development of an integrated educational support system infrastructure to help guide online learners from application to graduation. Their integrated support systems model addressed administrative support,

faculty and instructional design support, technical support, library and reference services, and student and program support services. Tait (2003) offered three reasons why an institution should consider integrating student support into an online learning system: Students want support; such support will help reduce drop-outs; and it promotes effective learning, particularly within a constructivist model. This article, thus, will highlight the faculty support-system components of instructional and administrative support.

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

As major stakeholders in online learning, faculty must be trained and supported as they venture into the distance realm. Instructors require assistance in making the transition from face-to-face teaching to online instruction (Johnson, 2003; Pelz, 2004). While traditional principles of good practice can be adapted to the online environment (Sorensen & Baylen, 2004), the prevalent approach is to rethink teaching and learning for the online environment. Online learners need to be understood in the context of the unique learning environment in which they are working, which includes both the virtual classroom and their extended off-campus world.

While there are numerous books, conferences and consultants available to assist faculty in making the transition online, perhaps the most personal and potentially effective approach is through faculty mentoring (Tonkin & Baker, 2004; Young, 2003). In such an approach, an existing online instructor serves as a tutor and mentor to new online faculty. Sometimes such mentors also serve as internal “champions” who can influence and assist greater numbers of faculty far more deeply than an external consultant. This may be done informally, simply as leaders emerge from the organization; or in a more formal mentoring process, where experienced online instructors and students offer one-on-one assistance to new Web-based participants. Online instructional modules, where faculty can experience the online environment themselves before teaching their first course, can also be particularly effective to assist in the training of new faculty (Gold, 2001; Lorenzo, 2002).

In traditional education, instructors do all aspects of course design and development by themselves. Now that the teacher-student communication is mediated

online through a computer, it is simply unrealistic, and a poor use of resources, to expect a faculty member to be content expert, Web developer, multimedia designer and systems administrator rolled into one. Just as businesses have learned the value of work teams, so too should online instructors team up with instructional designers and other support staff to develop a quality course (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). In a team approach, the faculty member is partnered with one or more instructional designers, multimedia developers or student assistants. These individuals should be well trained in their field and bring a customer-focused attitude toward their work.

Instructional designers bring insight into how to design the contents to maximize student learning. They will have the most insight on the media selection, layout of Web pages and overall instructional approach, and can help the faculty member translate content into a quality course to be delivered online. Multimedia developers not only can convert much of the content into an online format (e.g., creating a streaming audio or video segment based on a classroom lecture), but they can offer a sense of style to the course design. Finally, to accommodate laborious work involved in developing a distance course (e.g., Web page coding, scanning pictures, etc.), there might be student assistants who can assist the development team to accomplish such tasks. This is no small undertaking, as it requires a commitment not only from the instructor to collaborate on the course design (which is likely a new, and somewhat unsettling, experience), but also from the institution, which needs to commit the resources necessary for instructional design support (Kearsley, 2000).

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

A critical step in developing an effective online program is to consider the administrative support needs for planning and operations. Administrative functions require continuous and systematic support to internally market online learning to instructors and students alike. (This is in addition to external marketing, which is a given for both campus and online programs.) The failure to champion online learning could lead to tepid support from the faculty, resulting in frustration on many levels and eventual loss of students (Phillips, 2002). The authors experienced this when designing a new online masters degree program in computer-mediated

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