



Chapter V

Faculty Perceptions and Participation in Distance Education: Pick Fruit From The Low-Hanging Branches

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The environment for higher education has become much more dynamic and even more complex with the recent development of new digital technologies (Hanna, 1999, p. 25).

Motivating faculty members to teach at a distance has been a challenge for most colleges and universities. What will be the impact of teaching using technology on faculty responsibility? Is teaching students through any or all distance education methods really nothing more than adapting traditional classroom approaches? What are the attitudes and barriers to using technologies often associated with distance education? In this chapter the authors present data obtained from an extensive survey of faculty opinions on teaching at a distance, as well as several case studies describing incentives and training made available for distance education. To enhance participation in distance education, faculty must have the competence, attitude that distance education is important and valuable, and infrastructure available to facilitate the additional time and effort to convert courses. Faculty training programs cannot be “one-shot” and should include personnel in close proximity to faculty, preferable on their own equipment. Release time is an important incentive to encourage participation.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1989, Connie Dillon addressed the perceptions of faculty participation in instructional telecommunications. Her study provided insight into the factors that influence the integration of telecommunications teaching within the higher education system. A decade has passed and many higher education institutions are still struggling to integrate and utilize distance education technologies. The technologies have changed, but faculty attitudes often remain the same.

To prepare students successfully for today's digital marketplace, educators should incorporate the use of information technologies. "Educators must help all students become adept at distanced interaction, for skills of information gathering from remote sources and of collaboration with dispersed team members are as central to the future American workplace as learning to perform structured tasks quickly was to the industrial revolution" (Dede, 1996, p. 30). Students learn from competent instructors who have been trained how to communicate effectively through the technology. Thomas Cyr (1997) identifies 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 (Cyr, 1997). Lacina-Gifford and J.-Kher-Durlabhji (1996) emphasized that instructors must be part of a change process in their role as instructors if distance learning is to be successful. The authors also mentioned that the students attributed the success of the program to user-friendly technology and the promptness of the instructor in communicating with the students.

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. Faculty barriers stem from the lack of perceived institutional support (faculty rewards, incentives, training, etc.) for course conversion to distance education formats (Dillon & Walsh, 1992; McKenzie, Mims, Bennett, & Waugh, 2000; Wolcott, 1997; Olcott & Wright, 1995). Part of this support may include release time for course preparation. Reports indicate that teaching at a distance takes more time than teaching a traditional course (NEA, 2000; McKenzie, Mims, Bennett, & Waugh, 2000; Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, & Marx, 1999; Visser, 2000).

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