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Empowering Faculty Using Distance Learning Mentoring Programs

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Abstract

This article discusses the value of developing mentoring programs for the empowerment of distance learning faculty. The paper describes various ways mentoring relationships enhance the development and teaching of distance learning courses. Distance learning faculty mentoring programs consist of a process where a more experienced faculty member assists a newer faculty member in developing a distance learning course. By creating and supporting distance learning faculty mentoring programs, higher education institutions can provide an efficient and valuable way for new distance learning faculty to gain empowerment as well as the skills and knowledge they need to teach online. This article asserts that mentoring programs for faculty interested in teaching online may help transform universities from archaic institutions reliant on paper and pencil into living entities that meet the needs of the modern learner.

Introduction

Institutions of higher education in the United States have recently acknowledged the need for more distance learning courses and programs. Current statistics indicate that distance learning enrollments have increased for the fourteenth straight year (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Radicioni, 2018; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018), and this growth does not seem to be slowing down. It is estimated that six percent of all students take at least one distance learning course, and the number continues to grow as more institutions add distance learning options to the curricula. Laura Howe, the Vice President of Global Media and Communities at Pearson, claims, "It is

encouraging to see the upward trend in distance learning enrollments continue as students take advantage of flexible, high-quality education opportunities that position them for lifelong success,” (Radicioni, para. 5.). These promising statistics have led many researchers to examine ways to empower faculty while developing and teaching in this innovative way.

Empowerment of faculty is a critical component of any successful distance learning program. Arenas, Gray, and Hamner (2009) define empowerment as giving individuals the opportunity to grow and to use their experiences to contribute to decision-making processes. By providing them with new online course and program options, faculty are able to teach varied courses in areas they may not have been formerly offered in a face-to-face environment. Similarly, online instructors are encouraged to use new, innovative techniques in order to reach this wider, more diverse audience. The CEO and Executive Director of the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), Kathleen S. Ives asserts, “The growth in distance learning enrollments, in part, reflects the commitment to quality and innovation by those designing and delivering distance programs” (Radicioni, 2018, para. 6).

Although this transition from face-to-face instruction to distance learning seems like a positive one, some traditional, face-to-face professors resist this change and are hesitant to teach online (Lloyd, Byrne, & McCoy, 2012; Maguire, 2005). There are various reasons for this reluctance and fear. The process of redesigning face-to-face instruction to a distance learning format is a major paradigm shift for many faculty members (Arenas, Gray, & Hamner, 2009). The shift includes changing methodology, modifying media, and learning new technological applications. Traditional face-to-face instructors cite a variety of reasons for their hesitancy to switch to a distance learning format, including unfamiliarity with the pedagogy, lack of technical skills, uncertainty about the future of distance learning and the increased time involved learning a new way of teaching. Although these faculty members may be highly skilled in research and various forms of on-ground classroom instruction, they have little knowledge of online course design, the development of digital media, and the use of online learning management software. In order to feel empowered to teach distance learning courses, these faculty members need to feel the support of other instructors who have successfully transitioned from teaching face-to-face to teaching from a distance. This article will examine how higher education institutions can develop faculty mentoring programs to empower faculty during this process.

Background of Distance Learning and Faculty Involvement

Distance learning, otherwise known as distance education, has been defined as an institution-based form of teaching and learning where students are physically separated from instructors, and interactive telecommunication systems connect students with resources (Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek, 2014). There are four main characteristics that define distance learning. Primarily, distance learning is carried out through an institution. Students who succeed in distance learning courses are awarded college or university credit. Geographic separation is inherent in distance learning; learners and instructors are located in different areas. Interactive telecommunications connect the learning group with each other and with the instructor. Most often, electronic communications such as electronic mail or web-based tools are used, but traditional forms of communication such as the postal system may also play a role. Finally, distance learning establishes an official learning community, which is composed of students and an instructor.

There are specific motivating and inhibiting factors affecting faculty involvement in distance teaching and learning. Despite the demand and growth of distance learning courses and programs, the level of skepticism among faculty remains high (Wingo, Ivankova, & Moss, 2017). Certainly, faculty perceptions are important for a variety of reasons (Mandernach, Mason, Forrest, & Hackathorn, 2012). It is critical that faculty are onboard with technologically related initiatives and understand how to implement effective online courses. “In essence, successful online instruction does not happen by magic. It is a collaboration of instructors, administrators, students, and the community at large” (Yang & Cornelious, 2005, p. 13).

Rovai (2002) discusses the development of a community of distance learners and teachers. Community can be viewed as what people do together, rather than any specific place. Using this definition, community becomes separated from the actual location. Community is no longer tied to the physical college campus; it encompasses the idea of becoming part of a group (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). If created in an appropriate manner, members of educational communities can develop feelings of belonging and trust no matter the time or space. These feelings can help instructors feel empowered to transition to a distance learning modality of teaching. Members of a community believe that “they matter to one another and to the group; that they

have duties and obligations to each other and to the school; and that they possess a shared faith that members' educational needs will be met through their commitment to shared goals" (Rovai, para. 9).

The learning community is traditionally conceived as a group of students and professors located on the university campus or another physical location, and therefore many traditional faculty and administrators are constrained by a view of community tightly bound to the notion of students sharing ideas in a physical classroom (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000). However, Wellman and Gulia (1999) suggest that virtual communities are comparable face to face communities. Individuals who interact in an online environment can develop strong ties and trust which can lead to a sense of community. Brown (2001) studied the development of virtual communities in distance learning courses and claims there is a three-stage process. First, students develop virtual friendships with others in the course. Secondly, students develop community acceptance as they participate in a threaded discussion on a meaningful topic, and finally, camaraderie is achieved after a long-term, intense association involving personal communication with others in the course. Brown's work with online students can be applied to distance learning instructors.

Community empowerment among distance learning faculty can be promoted by including collaboration between instructors, administrators, and students (Mandernach, Donnelly, Dailey, & Schulte, 2005; Yang & Cornelious, 2005). To develop a strong distance learning community, colleges and universities may choose to establish informal or formal faculty mentoring programs. Mentors answer questions of new online instructors and facilitate the process. This support is a critical piece in overcoming the challenges and self-perceived barriers that many new distance learning instructors encounter. This article will suggest several possibilities for the development and maintenance of these distance learning mentoring communities.

Distance Learning Mentoring Programs

In order to empower faculty and develop a sense of community in the distance learning community, higher education institutions can implement mentoring programs for distance learning instructors (Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009). "Mentoring has long been recognized as an effective method for enabling new

employees to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors required to successfully discharge their responsibilities; in addition, mentors can help new employees better understand the organizational culture and institution-specific norms” (Wild, Canale, & Herdklotz, 2017, p. 37). Mentoring in terms of distance learning denotes a process where a more experienced faculty member or committee observes and assists a newer faculty member in developing a new distance learning course or migrating an existing course from face-to-face to an online or a hybrid version. Veteran distance educators are compensated for their services or volunteer to serve as mentors to new distance learning instructors. These mentors provide guidance and support on various distance learning designs and instructional issues. Mentoring may also include a time period where the mentor works with and supports the newer faculty member during the initial running of the course.

A mentoring program is a sign of an institution’s commitment to professional development and the general distance learning initiative (Mandernach, Donnelly, Dailey, & Schulte, 2005). Mentoring has the potential to increase feelings of empowerment and connectedness between faculty and the university (Brannagan & Oriol, 2014). Wild, Canale, & Herdklotz (2017) assert that the single mentor model has developed into mentoring networks or programs. These networks or programs can include one-on-one and group mentoring as well as providing multiple mentoring types and a variety of mentors. Mentors can provide individualized professional development activities such as how to facilitate online discussions, how to present a live video lecture, how to create engaging distance learning lessons, and how to assess online participation (Arenas, Gray, & Hamne, 2009). This variety and choice can create an open dialogue between veteran and novice faculty while cultivating a well-rounded and engaged campus community.

By creating and supporting a strong mentoring distance learning faculty network or program, higher education institutions can provide an efficient and valuable way for new distance learning faculty to gain empowerment as well as the skills and knowledge they need to teach online. A distance learning mentoring program can provide faculty with a community where they can seek help and ask questions without judgment (Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009). “Mentors should be available in each department or college who can answer questions that come up from faculty who have limited experience in teaching online courses” (Yang & Cornelious, 2005, p. 14). A mentoring team can include members who are experienced with distance learning practices and philosophy (Arenas, Gray, & Hamner, 2009). It is understood that the

veterans in the mentoring program have experienced the same process, so they are able to assist and support these new instructors. These members will help orient the newer individuals who are not familiar with distance learning practices. Mentors should include faculty from a variety of academic areas. This community of learners can stand by and facilitate the often lonely and intimidating process of online course development and teaching.

Furthermore, veteran distance learning faculty often view mentoring as a way to help their colleagues and give back to their institution (Parker, 2003). This collaboration can motivate, empower, and retain both new and veteran faculty members. Once teaching within the community of distance learning, many faculty feel their relationships with online colleagues are stronger than their relationships with colleagues in the traditional face to face setting (Muirhead, 2000). These relationships help empower them to continue their journey into distance learning and teaching. Many instructors who work from home offices report closer professional relationships with online colleagues than with colleagues in traditional school settings because they are able to reach out with questions or issues at any time. The continuous bonds create a sense of belonging and empowerment that extend outside the office or classroom doors.

Bower (2001) describes a variety of communication strategies that can be used to further empower faculty when they are involved in distance learning mentoring efforts. Bower suggests open communication throughout the planning and implementation stages of any distance learning mentoring program development. When faculty are actively involved in the decision-making regarding distance learning efforts, their concerns about the quality of the distance learning experience can be lessened. Arenas, Gray, and Hamne (2009) agree that faculty should be actively involved in all planning to personalize training. Various forms of technology (wikis, blogs, video conferencing, online discussion boards) can be used during this process to assist in the practice and application of tools.

Green, Alejandro, and Brown (2009) assert a mentoring program creates positive peer models and that mentoring can be used for various reasons. Most importantly, in this case, mentoring can be used as a quality control tool. When an experienced faculty member observes and assists a new distance learning faculty member in migrating a face-to-face course to an online or hybrid format, the main objective is to make sure the new course format meets required accreditation and university

standards. The second element of the mentoring process is course observation. The senior distance educator can access the new instructor's course shell in order to provide feedback during the initial teaching of the course. This process is similar to traditional, on-campus relationships where a veteran faculty member observes a new instructor in the classroom and offers suggestions to improve his or her pedagogy.

In addition to providing important instruction and support, a strong mentoring program can help assimilate new full-time, part-time or adjunct faculty into the higher education institution. The experiences and camaraderie the faculty share help the newcomers feel welcomed and a part of the academic community (Brown, 2001, Slade, Robb, Sherrod, & Hunker, 2017). Parker (2003) also suggests hosting faculty roundtables to allow seasoned faculty to share their distance teaching experiences with the interested faculty of all levels. These roundtables may be held in person or virtually using online conferencing tools such as Google Hangout or Zoom. Arenas, Gray, and Hamne (2009) suggest including professional development activities such as video presentations, online discussions, and face-to-face discussions. Using this model, a mentoring strategy can help to retain both new and the established faculty members. The primary goal of the mentoring program is to have faculty learn from each other rather than from an external expert.

Brannagan and Oriol (2014) describe a mentoring program model that could be used with adjunct faculty members. This model involves pairing experienced full-time faculty mentors with adjunct faculty. The mentors and mentees are matched based on educational background, professional experiences and course assignments. Other considerations include communication preferences, which are assessed to increase the likelihood of compatibility. Before the mentee teaches his first distance learning course, the mentor introduces him to the content and materials that are required for teaching a distance learning course at the institution. Then, ongoing communication and support are encouraged during the mentee's development and initial teaching. Brannagan and Oriol suggest, "Mentor and mentee must discuss the requirements for each module as it opens and then resolve any questions, issues, or conflicts as they occur. Mentors provide feedback as adjuncts grade written submissions, thus presenting an excellent opportunity to ensure consistency in grading, effective response techniques, and program stability. As the course progresses and the adjunct becomes more comfortable with content, materials, and format, the intensity of interactions between the mentor and mentee diminish" (p. 129).

Likewise, Slade, Robb, Sherrod, and Hunker (2017) found that both formal and informal mentoring experiences can be used as a strategy for facilitating adjunct professors involvement in the distance teaching community by enhancing their sense of belonging and connectedness. Mentoring relationships may provide an adjunct faculty member with a “go-to person” who can address situational concerns when the needs arise. Although mentoring can help all faculty, adjuncts are a different breed since many of them hold other full-time jobs and are often teaching fully from a distance. Wild, Canale, and Herdklotz (2017) claim that faculty members who invest time and energy in their mentoring relationships are much more likely to benefit from the experiences of others than are their peers who try to “go it alone” (p. 40).

Conclusion

This article addresses ways that faculty can be empowered to design and teach distance learning courses as higher education institutions develop accompanying mentoring programs. Faculty mentoring programs provide a valuable way for instructors to gain empowerment as well as obtain the knowledge, skills, and support necessary to teach online. The mentoring concept is crucial for institutions of higher learning; mentoring programs in distance learning may, in fact, be the missing link in transforming universities from archaic institutions reliant on the paper, pencil, and podium into living entities that meet the needs of the modern learner. These institutions can benefit from supporting faculty interested in distance learning through effective mentoring programs as new and veteran faculty alike strive to teach effectively in today's technological world.

Compliance with Ethical Standards:

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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