Chapter 7

Access, Relevance, and Inclusivity: Assessing What Matters Most to Virtual Faculty

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ABSTRACT

As institutions have expanded their virtual learning options to reach a broader community of learners, they have also increased the number of virtual faculty—largely adjunct or otherwise contingent—working remotely from the primary institution’s location. Supporting the professional growth of these geographically dispersed faculty members presents complex challenges for faculty developers, who, often with limited resources, must adopt new approaches. Against this backdrop are increasing expectations for all faculty to gain proficiency in new teaching methodologies, modalities, and learning analytics to increase student retention. This chapter reports on a comprehensive, multi-modal, and multi-perspective study undertaken by one institution regarding the needs of this changing faculty demographic, including virtual and face-to-face adjunct and full-time faculty. The research yielded insights from the student, faculty, and administrator perspectives. Recommendations are presented for creating accessible, relevant, and inclusive faculty development that integrates faculty at all ranks.

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INTRODUCTION

With approximately 5.8 million students taking online classes in the United States (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016), higher education faculty at all ranks are increasingly called upon to teach in multiple modalities. As institutions have evolved and adapted their offerings to include online and hybrid courses and programs, so too have faculty expectations evolved. In fact, one in three faculty members now teach online, with four in 10 faculty members teaching in hybrid or blended formats (Straumsheim, Jaschik, & Lederman, 2015). Yet professional development and training opportunities fail to address the need of this growing population of instructors teaching in online and hybrid formats. Faculty report a lack of training and preparation for the additional tasks of online course development and instruction, and many navigate the steep learning curve through their own self-directed efforts, often feeling isolated and disconnected from their institutions (Dailey-Hebert, Mandernach, Donnelli-Sallee, & Norris, 2014; Sabherwal, Ahuja, George, & Handa, 2015).

While academic administrators see the value and advantages to online learning integrations, many faculty members still harbor resistance toward online learning formats and question the quality of the learning experience it provides. Straumsheim and colleagues (2015) found that many faculty members perceive online courses as lower quality than their face-to-face counterparts and threaten instructor presence and organic, student-to-student interaction. At many institutions, tenure-line faculty, who arguably have the most potential to influence attitudinal changes about online teaching, are teaching fewer online and blended courses than adjunct faculty due to the advising, research, and service expectations of full-time faculty, or because online courses and programs may be managed outside the on-ground academic departments at some institutions. Magda, Poulin, and Clinefelter’s (2015) study found that institutions are increasingly relying on virtual adjunct faculty members to manage the courses and programs where enrollment is growing (i.e., online), even as traditional on-ground enrollments have been in steady enrollment decline across institution types for the past four years. Their results indicated 56% of institutions report adjunct faculty that teach online has increased at their institution, and 25% report that this number has increased by more than 5% (Magda, Poulin, & Clinefelter, 2015).

What results is often a steep divide between face-to-face instructors, both adjunct and full-time, and those virtual faculty, largely adjunct, who teach online and hybrid courses. In addition to compounding a sense of isolation and disconnectedness from the institution and academic department, this “out of sight, out of mind” phenomenon also manifests itself in a lack of professional development and training for virtual faculty. Faculty cite a lack a support, continuous learning opportunities and development programs available, particularly for faculty who are contingent and work remotely (Ubell, 2016). In his recent article for Inside Higher Ed, Ubell, Vice Dean for Online Learning at New York University, reports on a number of studies citing a lack of support for virtual faculty:

…faculty members also express serious concerns about the lack of institutional commitment – chief among them poor technical and pedagogical support. At some colleges and universities, faculty members are given an access code to their online class and sent into virtual space entirely without preparation. Faculty members who teach online also say they are inadequately compensated for the time it takes to migrate courses from on-campus classrooms to online ones (para. 7).
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