Chapter 18

Best Practices for Online Training and Support for Online Instructors

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ABSTRACT

The educational landscape in the past decade has seen exponential growth in online education with online enrollments in many graduate programs outpacing traditional enrollments. This rapid expansion has been attributed to increased student demand, declining budgets, recruitment and retention efforts. A study conducted by Babson College’s Arthur M. Blank Center for Entrepreneurship reported that approximately 33.5% of college students completed at least one online course before graduation. The authors also reported that 70.8% of Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) reported that expansion of online course offerings was critical to the long-term strategic plan for their universities. Despite the growth in online enrollment, many institutions find online course development to be a costly, labor-intensive process. This chapter provides an overview of the different components of a quality online course and examines best practices for training and supporting online instructors through the course development and delivery process.

INTRODUCTION

The shift towards online instruction is a trend that many universities have adopted mainly due to student demand, declining budgets and efforts to ensure recruitment and retention of a diverse student body. Nationally, approximately 7.1 million students (roughly 33.5% of students) report having completed at least one online course before they graduate from college (van-Rooij, & Zirkle, 2016). Despite the documented growth in online learning over the past decade, many universities discover that the system-
atic development of online education can be an expensive and work intensive process (Herman, 2013). Equally important, some universities reported that faculty confidence in online learning is down and in some instances faculty were resistant to designing and teaching online courses (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016; Frass & Washington, 2017; Herman, 2013).

Faculty who are new to online learning will require training in online pedagogy and best practices and depending on their current technical skills and experience with the LMS, some faculty may require technical training. Many universities utilize a variety of group training approaches either online, hybrid, or face-to-face to prepare faculty to teach online. Online or internet based learning is often offered using both asynchronous and synchronous modes of instruction. Asynchronous mode comprises of individual based instruction where students complete work independently at their own pace within a stipulated timeline as set by instructor. Synchronous mode of group instruction comprises of instruction where everyone is online at the same time regardless of their location. Group training is often used by a variety of universities given that is an efficient way to train many online faculty at one time. The challenge with this approach is that faculty can easily get overwhelmed during the group training given that too much information is presented all at once. Another challenge with this approach is that faculty come to these programs with different technical backgrounds, have different teaching styles, different types of courses, and often heavy teaching workloads. Recruitment efforts should center on faculty who are open to thinking differently about teaching and learning, course design and instruction and can deliver instruction or are open to learn best practices for online delivery. In addition, faculty must possess the willingness to learn how to navigate a variety of digital tools and other technology skills (Fish & Wickersham, 2009).

Studies have shown that the most effective strategies in generating faculty trust and buy in are one-on-one consultations, institutional incentives, and faculty showcasing and endorsement. Some institutions provide individual consultation and just-in-time training opportunities for faculty engaged in online course development. This form of training is often conducted months before the course development commences and is often forgotten when it is time to develop the course. In a national survey of institutions of higher education, Liu and Dempsey (2017) reported that 83% of the respondents favored one-on-one consultation to prepare for online teaching.

Herman (2013) examined the different forms of institutional incentives offered to faculty for designing an online course, teaching and on-line course, completion a faculty development that is less than and in some cases more than 8 hours. The author highlighted recognition in tenure and promotion, financial remuneration in the form of stipends or honorarium, course releases, technology awards and retention of intellectual property as some of the main incentives used by many universities. Institutions with the goal of increasing online instruction must invest additional resources on faculty development for online instruction. There is need to explore the use of a balanced approach that takes advantage of group training for information that is applicable to all online faculty combined with individual consultation and training during the course development process is ideal where possible. This chapter provides an overview of the different steps for developing a quality online course based on practices at a university. The different components of a quality online course will be examined followed by a discussion of best practices for training and supporting online instructors throughout the course development and delivery process.