Online Faculty and Adjuncts: Strategies for Meeting Current and Future Demands of Online Education Through Online Human Touch Training and Support

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ABSTRACT

Online education has grown exponentially over the past decade. Data collected by the Sloan Consortium reveals that between 2002 and 2009 students enrolled in at least one online course increased from 1.6 million to 5.6 million. It is projected that by 2020 up to 60% of college students will take their courses entirely online. A critical question for higher education administrators is “Who will teach these online courses?” Institutions need to be proactive and develop strategies for hiring and training faculty and adjuncts to meet this shift in educational delivery. Moreover, with online student attrition reported as being higher than traditional student attrition, faculty must also know how to engage and retain students in the online classroom environment. This article examines online faculty recruitment, online faculty training, and ten strategies for integrating Online Human Touch training and support into current and future online programs to increase faculty and student engagement and retention. Institutions that are not evaluating online education delivery options may face crisis or financial exigency. For many colleges and university, online faculty and adjuncts will be a central part of the future of the institution.

Keywords: Adjunct Faculty, Attrition, Distance Education, Faculty, Online Education, Online Human Touch, Professional Development, Retention

INTRODUCTION

Economic and demographic shifts are transforming the higher education landscape in the United States. “With substantial reductions in state funding, increasing operational costs, and endowments generating reduced returns, higher education must re-examine and reposition itself to meet new and emerging challenges” (Betts, Hartman, & Oxholm, 2010, p. 3). Shortfalls in budgets are forcing universities to close colleges, departments and programs. As shared by Daniel Klaich, Chancellor of Nevada’s higher-education system, “the prospect of shutting down an entire institution remains a ‘distinct possibility’ for the future” (Hebel, 2010, para. 4). Like many nonprofit organizations, survival for today’s colleges and universities will depend
upon achieving the elusive balance between flat or declining revenues and increasing expenses. Recognizing that long-term sustainability is critically linked to an institution’s annual operating budget and student enrollments, many institutions are developing and expanding online programs to reach new student markets.

Online education is growing exponentially. Between fall 2008 to fall 2009 online enrollment growth rates increased 21% across the United States while the overall higher education growth rates increased only 2% (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Online education is projected to increase significantly over the next 5 to 10 years. Ambient Insight indicates that more than 22 million students will enroll in some or all of their classes online in the next five years (Nagel, 2009). According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2009), up to 60 percent of college students will be taking their courses entirely online by 2020 as projected in the College of 2020: Student report. Recognizing that online enrollments are at an all time high and expected to continue growing, the recruitment, training, and retaining of online faculty and adjunct faculty is and will continue to be critical in meeting the current and future demands of online education.

While online education has continued to expand globally, it has not been without critics who have questioned the quality of online education. In an effort to address nationally raised questions and concerns regarding online education, the United States Department of Education published a report in 2009 entitled Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies that specifically examined the quality of online programs compared to traditional face-to-face programs. The report included a meta-analysis and a systematic search for empirical studies of the effectiveness of online learning. According to the report, “The overall finding of the meta-analysis is that classes with online learning (whether taught completely online or blended) on average produce stronger student learning outcomes than do classes with solely face-to-face instruction” (US Department of Education, p. ix). While the report does state that the “studies in the meta-analysis do not demonstrate that online learning is superior as a medium,” it goes on to state that “online learning is much more conducive to the expansion of learning time than is face-to-face instruction” (US Department of Education, p. ix).

This article presents (a) challenges of recruiting and retaining online faculty and adjunct faculty to meet current and future online student enrollments; (b) an overview of student attrition in online education; (c) an outline of the Online Human Touch (OHT) conceptual framework for training and support to increase faculty engagement and retention; (d) data from Drexel University’s Master of Science in Higher Education (MSHE) Program; and (e) 10 strategies for integrating OHT training and support into online programs to recruit, train, and retain faculty and adjuncts.

**Review of the Literature**

Online education offers higher education institutions new opportunities to reach expanded student markets through quality and cost-effective programming. However, there is no specific data available on the current number of full-time and part-time faculty who teach in online programs. Additionally, there is no available data on online full-time and part-time faculty retention. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), there were 1.3 million faculty members in the United States employed at degree-granting institutions in fall of 2005 of which 0.7 million were employed full-time and 0.6 million employed part-time faculty. The NCES did not provide a breakdown of faculty members by delivery method (e.g., traditional, blended, and online).

The Chronicle of Higher Education published a special report on October 31, 2010 entitled Online Learning: Online Ed Goes Mainstream. Within the report, several faculty-related data sets relating to online learning were shared from the Babson Survey Research Group, Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, and the Sloan National Commis-
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