Forgotten Faculty: Stress and Job Satisfaction Among Distance Educators

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Abstract

As distance education initiatives flourish throughout higher education, new avenues of opportunity have opened for students and faculty alike. The literature is rich in findings related to factors which foster student satisfaction and success in the virtual environment. Despite the rising numbers of faculty teaching exclusively at a distance, the literature is silent on the identification of factors that support faculty well-being in the areas of stress and job satisfaction for those teaching exclusively online. This descriptive study used Delphi methodology to identify stressors and levels of job satisfaction among faculty teaching exclusively at a distance.

Background

With growing numbers of faculty moving toward a teaching load that is geographically independent of both students and colleagues, it is critical that the support needs of these faculty are identified and addressed. Higher education administrators and faculty developers face the challenge of identifying and meeting the needs of this often highly diverse and geographically dispersed faculty. The information gathered can be used to inform administrators about those factors that induce and prevent stress and burnout, sustain occupational satisfaction and promote employee retention.

The purpose of this study was to provide an initial exploration into the experiences of distance education faculty with regard to occupational stress and job satisfaction. The data collected from this study provides descriptive information on stressors experienced by distance educators. Data was collected by way of a Delphi panel of higher educators who teach exclusively at a distance, moving them through adapted versions of Gmelch's (1986) Faculty Stress Index, a measurement of faculty stress levels, and the Abridged Job Descriptive Index (aJDI) which provided a measurement of job satisfaction for consensus within the panel.

The central question this study sought to answer was: *How do distance educators characterize their stress and stressors?* In addition to stress, the study also asked: *How satisfied are educators working exclusively in a distance environment?*

Review of Related Literature

Unfortunately, the literature offers little evidence of research into the affective experience of the distance educator. Although there is general recognition that managing students is a demanding and often stressful aspect of conducting a distance course, faculty support is most often limited to technical and instructional design support (Gates, 2000). There is little or no attention given to the totality of the experience of teaching at a distance, and what the impact is on a social or

personal level from the faculty perspective.

Cooper (1998) noted, “New technology…has added a burden of information overload as well as accelerating the pace of work, as a greater speed of response becomes the standard” (p. 314). This has potential to be particularly true in the higher education environment, whose client-base are young people who are native to the culture of instant information and instant response. The learner's sense of the “rolling present” can make faculty feel pressured to spend large amounts of time interacting with their distant students who frequently perceive distance education as an “always open” educational enterprise (Kimball, 1998).

A secondary factor that can directly influence the stress levels and job satisfaction of faculty operating exclusively at a distance is the scope of what “teaching” might mean as a distant faculty member. Increasingly, institutions heavily involved in distance education have created an organizational structure that “unbundles” (Paulson, 2002) the roles traditionally associated with the professorate.

When faculty roles are unbundled, the traditional faculty triad of research, teaching and service are changed and often separated. Most often this means limiting distance faculty to task-based activities related to instruction (Sherron & Boettcher, 1997). This shift may be a welcome change for the distance educator, freeing him or her to focus exclusively on the endeavors associated with teaching and learning. However it is also likely that it may be a detractor with regard to occupational satisfaction by removing duties that brought fulfillment and reward.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine how distance educators evaluate their own stress and identify the factors that contribute to or diminish stress. In addition, the occupational satisfaction of distance educators was explored across multiple dimensions to identify areas of satisfaction, dissatisfaction and indifference.

The Delphi Technique was selected as the method by which to gather initial data. This is an appropriate methodology based on the absence of foundational research in this area. The Delphi Technique was developed to assist researchers in establishing foundational research and its qualitative nature is appropriate for exploring subjective experiences like stress and job satisfaction.

While the classic Delphi often consists of an entirely free-form initial round whereby the respondents select items of interest and importance, modern embodiments of the methods recommend a more prescribed initial round. For this study, two quantitative instruments with high reliability and validity were selected as the foundation for the Delphi questionnaire. Each was modified to allow for open ended comments or rationale after each survey item. This provided the qualitative data for the study.

The selected questionnaires are both quantitative surveys, the Faculty Stress Index (FSI) to measure perceived stress levels of faculty, and the Abridged Job Descriptive Index (aJDI) to measure faculty job-satisfaction levels. Experts in teaching exclusively at a distance were recruited through the posting of an announcement regarding the study on the Distance Education Online Symposium (DEOS) and the Sloan Consortium Listserv (Sloan-C). From the posted request for participants, 16 individuals offered their participation. Qualifications of the 16

volunteers were reviewed through a socio-demographic survey and brief descriptions of work experience.

The final panel was comprised of 5 males and 9 females with an average age of 51. A group with much experience, the panelists had been higher educators for an average of 21.8 years and had been working as distance educators for an average of 9.4 years. In addition, these panelists represented seven states and three foreign countries.

As a computer-based survey, all interactions took place by email or online using Zoomerang online survey-creation software. The respondent's survey submission were recorded and stored within the browser-based system and provided both individual and aggregate data to the researcher for analysis, compilation and dissemination in future rounds. Respondents proceeded through three iterations of the survey, with the second and third rounds informed by the results of the prior iteration.

Findings and Results

Consensus within the panel suggests that the greatest sources of stress for distance educators relate to issues associated with Gmelch, Wilke and Lovrich's (1989) student interaction (SI) domain that encapsulates issues related to teaching and learning. Working with under-prepared students was ranked as the panel's greatest source of stress overall. Comments revealed frustration with trying to remediate in an asynchronous environment and the reality that much of the remediation they are providing should have been provided earlier in the student's academic career.

Perhaps not surprisingly, student evaluation also ranked highly for these distance educators, who noted in their comments that rigorous teaching and learning is not always popular with students. Student evaluation also fell into the student interaction (SI) category within the Gmelch, Wilke and Lovrich (1989) categories. Reflections on the increasing consumer view held by students and the institutional politics of student satisfaction often impede effective instruction and evaluation for both teacher and student.

Table 1
Items Ranked Significant in Round One

		FSI Questions	Round 1		
Cateogry	Number		Mean	Median	IQR
DI	7&8	Complying with departmental/institutional regulations.	3.38	3	3
SI	11&12	Evaluating the performance of students.	2.85	3	2

PI	15&16	Imposing excessively high self-expectations.	3	3	3
SI	37&38	Teaching/advising inadequately prepared students.	3.46	4	1
RR	43&44	Insufficient reward for institutional/departmental service.	2.31	3	2
TC	59&60	Attending meetings which take up too much time.	2.85	3	3

Table 2
Items Ranked Significant in Round Two

		FSI Questions	Round 2		
Category	Number		Mean	Median	IQR
PI	15&16	Imposing excessively high self-expectations.	3.09	4	2.5
TC	57&58	Too heavy a work load.	2.17	4	3
TC	59&60	Attending meetings which take up too much time.	2.58	4	2

Table 3
Items Ranked Significant in Round Three

		FSI Questions	Round 3		
Category	Number		Mean	Median	IQR
SI	11&12	Evaluating the performance of students.	2.64	2	3.5
PI	15&16	Imposing excessively high self-expectations.	2.36	2	3

Workload (category TC) also ranked highly across all three iterations. The comments contributed to these questions spoke directly to the unique demands of distance education. The pressure of

being online and available to students on a round-the-clock basis and the feeling that you're never ‘done' with teaching in the way you are when a class period ends led to comments about distance education being “fatiguing” and intrusive on personal and leisure time.

Connected to workload were high faculty stress rankings related to self-imposed expectations about performance and achievement. These are also categorized under TC in the tables. While this quest to be the best may not be unique to distance faculty, the rationale following these rankings suggest that this sense of urgency to achieve and please is augmented by the 24/7 nature of the distance education environment and the guilt many distance educators feel about not being as available as their students feel they ought to be.

The role of distance educators as primarily focused on instruction is reflected in the panel's conviction that service, research and publication fall outside their responsibilities. Their physical and geographic separation from home campuses removes concerns about office, classroom space and supplies. The disconnect reported with regard to social events, collegial relationships and being evaluated is again reflective of the remote nature of their jobs. Though they are employed by and affiliated with a physical entity, they consider their day to day operation as separate from the larger whole.

The aJDI is divided into five subscales. The Job In General (JIG) subscale showed the highest consensus in all three rounds with respondents generally holding a positive view of their work. Results and consensus were similarly positive in the Describe Your Work subscale, in which panelists characterized their work as “satisfying” and contributing a sense of accomplishment. Table 4 provides a summary of those items that reached unanimous ratings as either a ‘yes', affirming the statement, or a ‘no', refuting it.

Table 4
aJDI Items Receiving Unanimous Ratings by Round

	Category and Item Descriptor		Unanimous Rating Type
Round 1	Work at Present Job:	Satisfying	Yes
	Job in General:	Gives Sense of Accomplishment	Yes
		Disagreeable	No
		Undesirable	No
		Enjoyable	Yes
		Poor	No
Round 2	Work at Present Job:	Challenging Undesirable	Yes
	Job in General:	Good	No

		Dull	Yes
		Disagreeable	No
			No

Table 4
aJDI Items Receiving Unanimous Ratings by Round, Continued

The Colleague domain showed inconsistent consensus, as colleagues had difficulty characterizing the traits of their peers. It appears that the lack of regular interaction with their colleagues made assessment in these areas difficult.

The areas of lowest consensus related to Current Pay, Promotion and Supervision. Current pay showed high dispersion, as panelists failed to reach consensus on the adequacy and fairness of their pay across the three rounds.

Opportunities for Promotion and Supervision were also inconsistently ranked. One point of interest is that several panelists noted that, while avenues of promotion were open to them, their contentment with their current position left them uninterested in pursuing them. With regard to supervision, the frequency of “Cannot Decide” show that distance education faculty are inconsistently evaluated by their supervisors and have, in most cases, an arms-length relationship with administrators. As one panelist noted “out of sight, out of mind” appears to operate in this area.

Implications for Administrative Practice

For distance education administrators, it is important to recognize that distance educators view themselves as dedicated almost exclusively to instruction. The traditional triad of higher educators sharing their time between teaching, service and scholarship is not perceived as applicable to most distance educators who consider themselves first and foremost teachers. Further, their separation from campus demands that faculty identified for distance teaching be intrinsically motivated and independent. Faculty with a strong need for affiliation and supervision are less likely to thrive as distance educators. Conversely, the panel's comments suggest that faculty who take great enjoyment in teaching and are comfortable working under little supervision are well-suited to this endeavor.

Administrators would be wise to note, however, that the strong independence shown by this panel makes conformity to institutional regulations less likely among distance educators, as they frequently see themselves as operating outside the boundaries of their campus-bound peers. Further, their strong independence has the potential to impact retention, as distance educators who feel no strong ties to their home institutions may feel less inclination to dedicate their career to any one institution.

A final warning to distance education administrators relates to the frequency of the panelists' comments about distance education being a round-the-clock endeavor and the stress that comes from having a job with no clear start and finish time. While the panelists appear to believe that they are responsible for setting their own guidelines in this area, it is important for program

administrators to recognize this stress and to realize that if faculty members are unable to temper it themselves, burnout is likely. Placing strong emphasis on the need for distance educators to place reasonable demands on themselves and to establish their own boundaries between work and personal life is critical to retaining a healthy and productive faculty body.

Care should be taken to make even remote faculty feel a part of the greater whole of this institution thorough regular communication and support. This will enhance their sense of affiliation to both the school and the individuals that comprise it, increase compliance with regulation and – ideally – positively impact occupational satisfaction.

The results of this study indicate that distance education is a rewarding career path for many higher education faculty. The challenges faced by faculty teaching exclusively at a distance are not entirely different from those of their on-campus counterparts, but the form those challenges take and the avenues by which they are managed are necessarily changed in the distance environment.

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