Desired Versus Actual Training for Online Instructors in Community Colleges

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Abstract

The growth of distance education and the demand for instructors has developed over the past ten to fifteen years. There is a perception that the type and amount of instructor preparation is highly variable between institutions. Of the faculty members at two year institutions surveyed, nearly half did not attend training over the previous year. With technology changing rapidly, there is a need for training annually to assure faculty members who teach online are prepared. Distance education administrators need to evaluate their distance education programs and develop a consistent and current infrastructure to assure that their faculty members are being properly trained to teach online.

Introduction

Distance education has been growing as a form of undergraduate education over the last decade. According to a survey by Allen and Seaman (2007), almost 3.5 million students were enrolled in at least one online class during the fall of 2006 compared to 1.6 million in fall of 2002. This represents a compound growth rate of 21.5%. In addition, almost 20% of all United States students took at least one online class in the fall of 2006.

The 9.7% growth rate for online enrollment in two-year associate institutions is much greater that the 1.5% growth overall of the higher education student population (Allen & Seaman, 2007). This rapid growth in online education requires institutions to ensure that their faculty members receive professional development in the area of online teaching. Consequently, there is a need to investigate the training that is being used to educate faculty on best practices with online courses.

According to Frey and Donehue (2002), "technology is rapidly changing the dynamics of the community college learning environment, presenting both opportunities and challenges to faculty and administrators" (p. 3). Additionally, Moon, Michelich, and McKinnon (2005) state that faculty members need new skills in online instruction. There are numerous research studies and articles that emphasize the need for faculty training and development to assist them in online instruction (Almala, 2006; Bathe, 2001; Frey & Donehue, 2002; Moon et al., 2005).

However, a study by Bathe (2001) indicated that training for faculty members were not being taken advantage of and suggested that online training may overcome the barriers of the timing of these types of courses. Frey and Donehue (2002) also noted similar findings stating that 335 of respondents felt that lack of training was a barrier to teaching online. Furthermore, a report prepared by the Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers (2000) concluded that faculty members must receive adequate training in order to appropriately teach online.

The type of training needed is not limited to online course design; however, all aspects of online instruction need to be covered for participating faculty (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). In most cases, the basics of the delivery of technology may be covered in training or it may be left to the instructor to learn the technology on their own. There is a need for faculty to maintain and upgrade their knowledge about online teaching.

In particular, best practices for online teaching continue to emerge and faculty must learn and stay abreast of the latest developments. Continued innovation in distance education technology is another motivation for faculty to stay informed about these new advances.

Literature Review

In this section, the literature is reviewed in the main topic areas of interest: (1) preparation for online teaching, and (2) best practices for online teaching. These topic areas are also the primary and secondary focus in our survey questions.

Preparation

The main premise for preparation is that good training and preparation are necessary to provide instructors with the foundation to allow them to succeed in online teaching. Several studies have made similar assertions or conclusions regarding the need for training and development if high quality online instruction is to be achieved (Bathe, 2001; Dooley & Magill, 2002; Lee, 2001; Miller & King, 2003; Willis, 1994).

The literature on training and preparation for online teaching is quite limited. Based on an extensive literature review, Wolf (2006) supports this claim. Wolf went on to investigate training programs in educational institutions and corporations. Her study concluded that successful training programs are led by instructors who: (1) have significant computer competencies prior to beginning their own training for teaching online; (2) have received training in the course delivery system; (3) have continuing support from the institution, and (4) are motivated to work in an online environment (Wolf).

As another example of preparation that faculty should receive, Schoenfield-Tacher and Persichitte (2000) list the following areas where faculty must gain competencies: (1) "become proficient in the use of the chosen delivery technology; (2) design lessons that are more student centered; (3) adapt to teaching in the absence of nonverbal feedback from students; (4) and develop methods of communicating their content without lecturing" (p. 1).

It is important to note that course delivery system and chosen delivery technology are common to the two lists, but are used to denote the same idea. The delivery technology represents the very fundamental skills and is the main focus of available training. The remaining items on the two lists cover a broad spectrum from institutional support all the way down to student centered lesson design. The former is a resource and administrative issue while the latter falls into the realm of best practices.

However, pedagogy is sometimes missing from training and training usually covers technical aspects of a delivery system (Pankowski, 2004). Pankowski found that faculty members were frustrated with training that was inadequate and only 20% of respondents received training in two best practices: active learning and student collaboration.

As an example of required training, the University of Phoenix (UOP) offers an online training program to prepare online course facilitators (Muirhead & Betz, 2002). For this program, there are also some basic preparations before a candidate is accepted into the program. The qualifying preparation includes an Outlook Express proficiency test followed by a tutorial that instructs the candidate on the configuration of email and newsgroup accounts, as well as how to format email messages. These again represent fundamental level of skills that are necessary for successful online instruction. These skills might also be viewed as corresponding with some of the computer competencies that were on Wolf's (2006) list.

The preparation at UOP continues in the form of indoctrinating faculty to the idea of working with an online institution of higher education (Muirhead & Betz, 2002). After four weeks of online training, the candidate advances to the next stage, the mentorship. An experienced UOP faculty member provides this phase of the training by working closely with the candidate and reviewing the candidate's online materials on a regular basis. Muirhead and Betz emphasizes "the need for practicing the skills required to facilitate or to teach an online class, to manipulate the online environment, and to master the required skills of communication and interaction cannot be underestimated" (para. 1).

Yang and Cornelious (2005) take a somewhat different perspective. Their perspective is that "instructors need to adjust their attitudes to teach online, understand what qualifications are needed, and know what they can do to ensure the quality of online instruction" (para.19). The authors suggest that these measures alone will not ensure quality, nor will training in the use of technology. The authors suggest a broader approach, which is summarized

in the following statements: (1) "qualification of the instructors should be a first consideration; (2) … those who teach online courses should understand what their roles are and adjust their attitudes for this role change; (3) … it is important for instructors to master design and delivery strategies, techniques, and methods for teaching online courses; (4) … the institution should provide technical and financial support for faculty; (5) …[and] school administrators should also realize what their role and responsibilities are in ensuring quality online instruction" (Yang & Cornelious, para. 46).

These observations share some common ground with the earlier observations listed by Wolf (2006) and Schoenfield-Tacher and Persichitte (2000). The observations about roles and financial support are new ones that do not appear in the earlier lists. The roles have more to do with the instructor's mindset or attitude. We certainly agree that faculty who are motivated to teach online and are enthusiastic about working in the online environment will be more likely to succeed.

However, Levy and Beaulieu (2003) stated that there is not enough planning for staff training and support for online distance learning. Planning for distance learning also includes recruitment and proper training for faculty members as well. These issues could affect the desire to teach online. In addition, Bower and Hardy (2004) add, "faculty support and training are necessary if distance education is to be successful in community colleges" (p. 11), which is ultimately needed for community colleges as their online enrollment continues to grow (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

The training and preparation not only needs to cover the basic information on course delivery platforms and technical areas, but also include best teaching practices. The training should cover the latest developments for distance education instruction.

Best Practices

In 1987, Chickering and Gamson utilized published research and personal knowledge to outline key components and instructional strategies that would lead to quality undergraduate education in face-to-face classrooms. Seven Principles for improving undergraduate teaching were derived to represent evaluation criteria and to provide a framework for practical application in the university classroom (Chickering & Gamson, 1991).

Since that time, the Seven Principles have evolved into standards for undergraduate education and have been used by instructors in face-to-face classrooms to enhance the quality of instruction (Cross, 1999; The Ohio Learning Network Task Force, 2002). These principles have also set the stage for a large number of research studies (Batts, Colaric, & McFadden, 2006; Braxton, Olsen, & Simmons, 1998; Buckley, 2003; Graghm, Cagiltay, Craner, & Lim, 2000; Taylor, 2002) in support of both face-to-face and online course quality.

Chickering and Gamson's (1987) Seven Principles assert that good practice in undergraduate education does the following: (1) encourages student-faculty contact; (2) encourages cooperation among students; (3) encourages active learning; (4) gives prompt feedback; (5) emphasizes time on task; (6) communicates high expectations; (7) respects diverse talents and ways of learning).

These principles have set standards for undergraduate instruction and have been used to enhance the quality of instruction in traditional face-to-face classrooms (The Ohio Learning Network Task Force, 2002). With an increase in the offerings of online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006; Miller & King, 2003; Moon et al., 2005; Muirhead & Betz, 2002; Patrick & Yick, 2005), and the principles being designed to be accessible, understandable, practical and widely applicable, you can apply the same principles to an online environment.

The Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) article is an expansion of the 1987 principles and does bring the best practices into a "technology rich environment" (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006, p. 84). With the current technology and instructional programs, there is a wide array of opportunities allowing one to adhere to the Seven Principles in an online environment.

From this foundation, this study seeks to investigate preparation and best practices among faculty of technology-oriented coursework in North Carolina Community Colleges. In the next section, the research design will be discussed. Following that discussion, the survey instrument employed in this study will be explained and the results evaluated.

Methodology

For our study, we took a more focused approach and looked only at the preparation for online faculty at two-year institutions. Our survey determined if training opportunities were taken advantage of by faculty members. We then explored the actual practices being used in online courses.

To explore these topics, an existing survey instrument was selected and minor revisions were made in order to collect data regarding the type of preparation, the amount of preparation and the source of that preparation. Another aspect of the survey is the exploration of exposure to best practices that instructors may have gained through their preparation and training. The natural progression also leads to questions regarding actual practices in online courses and if online instructors are employing best practices.

The survey instrument was administered via email and online to a sample of faculty from a wide range of technology-oriented programs from universities across the United States. However, for this paper the focus was narrowed to responses from faculty who teach online in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). The quantitative data collected was analyzed using measures of frequency and variability through the Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS). Findings are intended to promote change in order to support student success in the online learning atmosphere.

Research Design

For this study, a survey instrument was utilized to obtain the perception pertaining to faculty's experiences with training/preparation and actual practices in online courses within the NCCCS. The survey used was adapted from the instrument used by Kosak, Manning, Dobson, Cotnam, Colaric, and McFadden (2004).

The intent of the Kosak et al. (2004) research project was to examine the training and support available to online instructors in the University of North Carolina System. Since the instrument utilized was originally geared toward a large statewide, four-year university system, modifications were necessary to include specific community college practices for online training, as well as include adjustments for various differences in instructors' needs for preparation and training in the online environment.

The original modifications included the addition of questions regarding online course training received by instructors at an institution immediately prior to the current employer and aimed at defining best practices use in the classroom. Once the original survey questions were aligned with the research project focus, a panel of distance education experts reviewed the instrument for validation and reliability.

For this study, the sample focused specifically on instructors from technology-oriented disciplines. The initial group of participants was identified from attendees at a distance education session at the National Association of Industrial Technology (NAIT) Conference in Cleveland, Ohio in November 2006. Additional subjects for participation were identified by reviewing the websites for the technology-oriented programs from two-year institutions associated with NAIT.

The next group of subjects was identified from websites for institutions within the University of North Carolina System. These were again limited to technology-oriented programs. The final group was identified by reviewing websites for technology-oriented programs in the NCCCS. New parameters, focusing on instructors from the NCCCS, were utilized to address the questions being explored within this project.

The survey was developed in the online survey software program, Perseus®. Perseus® facilitates writing questions and answers in various standard formats that encourages a single response or allows multiple responses. The software also accommodates the development (or importing) of an email list for online survey distribution.

Survey notifications were sent to subjects via email. In this email, subjects were given instructions to access a website hosting the survey. They were also given an explanation of the research focus and made aware that participation was voluntary. The participant could then complete and submit the survey while remaining anonymous. Data were then collected and analyzed within Perseus®.

The survey used for this paper was sent to 60 potential respondents via email. These individuals were identified as faculty or instructors who teach online at two-year community colleges. A total of 22 individuals completed the online survey tool.

Results

Research questions from the survey requested information about attendance within the last year of off-campus and on-campus training concerning online teaching. It also included questions about the level of agreement of best practices in online instruction for both training and usage. Information presented in Tables 1 through 4 reflects descriptive statistics (frequency) by public 2-year educational institutions in North Carolina.

Table 1

Attendance of Off-Campus Training

Response	f	Count
I did NOT attend any OFF-CAMPUS training concerning online teaching this past year.	40.7%	11
Conferences	25.9%	7
Group sessions	11.1%	3
Training	14.8%	4
Printed materials	18.5%	5
Mentorship	0%	0
Listservs	3.7%	1
Regular discussion sessions among peers	18.5%	5
Observations of other distance courses	11.1%	3
Web-based tutorials	18.5%	5
One-on-One training	0%	0
Other	0%	0

Note. 22 valid responses for the two-year Institutions in North Carolina.

Table 2

Attendance of On-Campus Training

Response	f	Count
I did NOT attend any ON-CAMPUS training concerning online teaching this past year.	44.4%	12
Conferences	3.7%	1
Group sessions	11.1%	3
Training	25.9%	7
Printed materials	18.5%	5
Mentorship	0%	0
Listservs	0%	0
Regular discussion sessions among peers	11.1%	3
Observations of other distance courses	0%	0
Web-based tutorials	7.4%	2
Other	0%	0

Note. 22 valid responses for the two-year Institutions in North Carolina.

Table 3

Best Practices Training

Response	f	Count
Timely feedback	48.1%	13
Supporting students through online communications	18.5%	5
Redesigning (chunking) learning resources	11.1%	3
Setting rules for a friendly online environment	40.7%	11
Setting up group activities and group pages	22.2%	6
Using discussion boards to facilitate interaction	33.3%	9
Using chatrooms to facilitate interaction	0%	0
Guiding students to external online resources	29.6%	8
Including graphics, sound and video to create a sense of "place"	14.8%	4
Using voiceover with PowerPoint® (PPT) or PPT Producer® for instruction	14.8%	4
Using Camtasia® for instruction	11.1%	3
Using Centra® for live voice chat	0%	0
Using online assessment tools (e.g. quizzes)	37.0%	10
Using proctored assessment avenues	0%	0
Using chat or instant messaging for online office hours	3.7%	1
Guiding students to online library resources	14.8%	4
Providing detailed Syllabus Information (e.g. Learning modules)	14.8%	4
Providing Introduction activities	18.5%	5
Other	3.7%	1

Note. 22 valid responses for the two-year Institutions in North Carolina.

Table 4

Best Practices Used in Online Courses

Response	f	Count
Timely feedback	74.1%	20
Supporting students through online communications	66.7%	18
Redesigning (chunking) learning resources	29.6%	8
Setting rules for a friendly online environment	55.6%	15
Setting up group activities and group pages	22.2%	6
Using discussion boards to facilitate interaction	63.0%	17
Using chatrooms to facilitate interaction	3.7%	1
Guiding students to external online resources	40.7%	11
Including graphics, sound and video to create a sense of "place"	25.9%	7
Using voiceover with PowerPoint® (PPT) or PPT Producer® for instruction	3.7%	1
Using Camtasia® for instruction	14.8%	4
Using Centra® for live voice chat	0%	0
Using online assessment tools (e.g. quizzes)	55.6%	15
Using proctored assessment avenues	18.5%	5
Using chat or instant messaging for online office hours	14.8%	4
Guiding students to online library resources	37.0%	10
Providing detailed Syllabus Information (e.g. Learning modules)	59.3%	16
Providing Introduction activities	55.6%	15
Other	7.4%	2

Note. 22 valid responses for the two-year Institutions in North Carolina.

A research question developed around training opportunities attended within the last year was developed for both 'off-campus' as well as 'on-campus' training received within the past year. The question was the same for each type of training. Respondents could select all training opportunities they attended within the past year. These included: not attending any training, conferences, group sessions, training, printed materials, mentorship, listservs, regular discussion sessions among peers, observations of other distance courses, web-based tutorials, and one-on-one training. Also asked of the respondents were best practices in online teaching training and actual use in an online course. Tables 1 through 4 describe the results.

Participants could select all that applied. Responses from public two-year educational institutions in North Carolina noted that 40.7% did not attend any "off-campus" training within the past year. Attending "off-campus" conferences was the second highest response for participants in community colleges at 25.9%

The responses varied for the "on-campus" training attended in the past year. The public two-year educational institutions in North Carolina responded with 44.4% not attending any "on-campus" training. The respondents from the public two-year educational institutions in North Carolina second highest response rate were noted as training (25.9%).

Two research questions asked if participants were trained in best practices and what best practices were utilized in their online course(s). Respondents were requested to select all responses, which applied. Example of responses available ranged from the following:

- timely feedback
- supporting students though online communications
- redesigning (chunking) learning resources
- setting rules for a friendly online environment
- setting up group activities and group pages
- using online assessment tools.

The responses from public two-year educational institutions in North Carolina had three major areas of training in best practices: timely feedback, 48.1%; setting rules for a friendly online environment, 40.7%; and using online assessment tools (e.g. quizzes), 37.0%.

The next set of responses dealt with actual use of best practices in the classroom. The responses from public two year educational institutions in North Carolina had three major areas of using best practices: timely feedback, 74.1%; supporting students through online communication, 66.7%; and using discussion boards to facilitate interaction, 63.0%. The majority of the respondents also reported using online assessment tools (e.g., quizzes) 55.6%; setting rules or a friendly online environment 55.6%; providing introduction activities 55.6%; and providing detailed syllabus information (e.g., learning modules) 59.3%.

Implications and Conclusions

This project reflected the survey tool responses of 22 of the 60 North Carolina Community College System participants, a return rate of 36.1%. This response rate reflects and is in agreement with the typical email survey response rate in both Dillman (2007) and Sheehan (2001) of approximately 34%.

The results of this study are important in that the data collected emphasizes a need for further research in the areas of faculty training for online courses. Overall, in this project a large portion of participants noted they did not receive both on-campus and off-campus training concerning online teaching this past year. Technology is advancing rapidly and faculty members who teach online need training to stay competent with the new technologies. With the decline in the economy and institutions' budgets being reduced, institutions will need to look at alternative methods to train their online faculty members such as web-based tutorials and mentorships rather than conventional training and conferences.

The listing of mentorship as a training mechanism for online teaching was not selected by participants indicating that mentorship from off-campus or on-campus locations was not a practiced technique. It is interesting to note that while mentoring could serve the population well in training and supporting faculty members who teach online (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), it is seemly being underutilized or not utilized at all, possibly due to the lack of the necessary consistent structure within institutions to support a quality mentorship throughout several institutions.

Quality web-based instruction can provide efficient and effective means of training faculty members who teach online. Training modules can be developed in small and manageable sizes that will address critical areas of interest in a time frame that will consume a faculty member's time. The wed-based training modules can cover not only key aspects of teaching online but also best practices that will assist professors in ensuring quality instruction.

Providing best practices during the online course is viewed as one outcome of training for teaching online courses. All participants appeared to understand the need for timely feedback for assignments in online courses and noted that this best practice was used frequently, along with setting rules from a friendly online environment,

guiding students to external sources and using discussion boards to facilitate interaction. However, the use on synchronous discussion either through chat rooms or voice activated chat (Centra®) was only reported being used 3.7% and 0% respectively. Best practices seemed to be utilized by the faculty members who were surveyed; however, development and training with technologies that assist in synchronous discussion is needed to enhance the educational experience.

Wolf (1999) stated "Distance education programs thrive when the institution provides the necessary financial, human, and infrastructure resources necessary to design, maintain, and support distance education training programs" (p.60). Through this study, it is apparent that the two-year institutions within the state of North Carolina still need to dedicate time and effort to the training of their faculty who teach online and also create an infrastructure that assists and promotes training. Though lack of funding is certainly an issue, there are practices, which could be utilized with minimal funding. Peer discussions, observations of current online courses utilizing best practices, and a structured mentorship program could send faculty members on the path to learning practices that promote student success and higher learning. It may be necessary for two-year institutions to review training offered for teaching online in order to address the issue of faculty members not attending training within the institution, whether it is implementing new types of training or revisions to current training to make the training more palatable.

In summary, distance education administrators need to develop an infrastructure that provides their faculty members with the resources and support to deliver high quality online instruction. As part of this, distance education administrators need to evaluate the latest technologies and develop web-based training modules that are train their faculty members in brief and informative formats. Finally, mentorship programs need to be developed by distance education administrators. A successful mentorship program will provide support and the sharing of knowledge between faculty members who teach online.

There is a need for more research to be conducted in this area in order to gather more information concerning training faculty members to teach online. Data collected, such as current available training at institutions, student satisfaction, and student evaluation could prove to be important in promoting student success by training faculty to be successful online instructors.

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