

Invest In The Success Of Online Programs At The University? Mentor Professors

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ABSTRACT

The Distance Education Mentoring Program (DEMP) is a unique program designed to assist faculty with developing and teaching quality online courses. This paper describes a survey assessment of the 92 faculty members who completed the program over the last four years and looks at preliminary data determining the program's success.

Keywords: distance education; faculty development; mentoring; faculty satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

As online courses and academic programs are becoming more commonplace at colleges and universities (Allen & Seaman, 2010), a growing number of faculty are being asked (or are asking) to teach online. Teaching online, however, is a different experience than teaching face-to-face, requiring new skills and techniques. Faculty may struggle with learning the necessary technology skills, adapting their pedagogic strategies for the online environment, adjusting to the more learner-centered focus inherent in online courses, conceptualizing their course for the new environment, and finding the increased time required to develop their online course. To address these unique challenges related to teaching in the online environment, many institutions have developed programs to support and assist faculty during the course development process. Thus, mentoring-based and collaborative approaches to online course development are becoming more commonplace. Research suggests that career success, resiliency to stress and satisfaction with work are enhanced by a mentoring relationship (Bell, 1998; Kram, 1985; Allen & Seaman, 2007). A mentoring approach developed by Purdue University Calumet was a strategic response aimed at ensuring the academic integrity of distance education by aligning the conditions for optimal learning with the best technology for online delivery.

OVERVIEW

The Distance Education Mentoring Program developed to meet faculty needs is described in The International Journal of E-Learning by Barczyk, Buckenmeyer and Feldman (2010). This unique program focuses on mentoring as the process used to educate adults. A timeline showing the four stages of the Distance Education Mentoring Program model is furnished in Figure 1.

The Distance Education Mentoring Program (DEMP) is designed to educate and certify faculty members in the principles of instructional design for the purpose of enhancing the quality of their online courses. Specifically, the goals of the Distance Education Mentoring Program are (1) to ensure the academic integrity of distance education courses and (2) to align the conditions for learning with the technology used to deliver courses. The program uses a rubric developed by Quality Matters (QM), which is a faculty-centered, peer review-based process designed to certify the quality of online courses (Maryland Online, 2006). Faculty members who have been through the QM certification process and have online teaching experience serve as mentors.

To gain insight into the protégé experience in a mentoring-based online course development program, the protégés from the four offerings of the Distance Education Mentoring Program were surveyed.

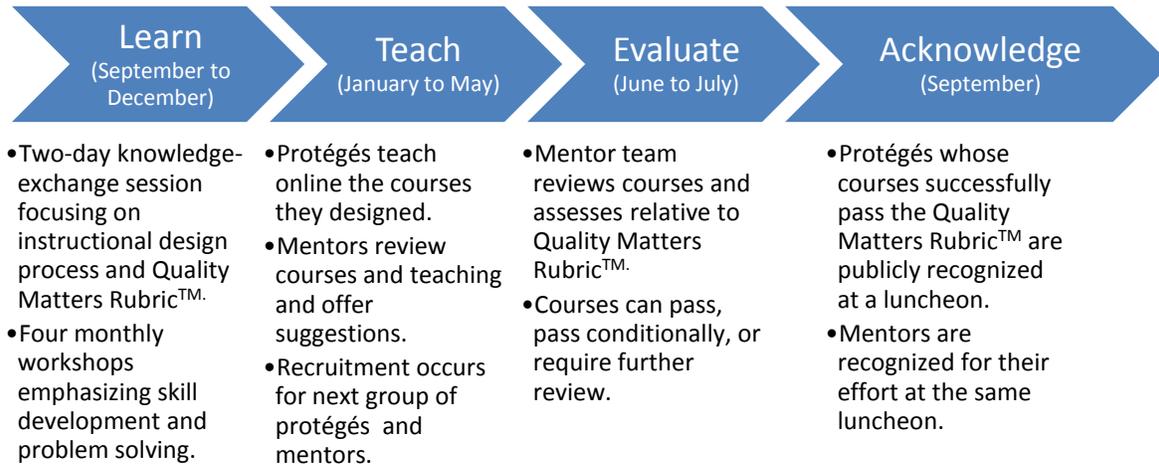


Figure 1: Four-Stage Model of the Distance Education Mentoring Program

METHODOLOGY

The primary research question addressed in this study is, “how successful is the DEMP, in terms of faculty perception?” Does program participation ensure success for the university?

This research is not trivial but it is key to accruing the benefits that the Distance Education Mentoring Program can offer for university administrators and other key stakeholders, including protégés, and students. Successful institutions measure themselves in a variety of ways depending on what is important to them; one plausible measurement used to evaluate Internet-supported learning is faculty satisfaction (Abel, 2005). Faculty satisfaction is one major factor in determining whether the program is successful. If faculty are not satisfied with the product, then they won’t tell others, they won’t implement the skills learned into other distance courses, and the release time provided by the administrators will be wasted on the effort.

Specific demographic factors researched include gender, tenure status, age, number of years at Purdue University Calumet, years of teaching experience, ethnicity, specific school within Purdue University Calumet in which the participant is a faculty member, prior experience with online courses, and time effect (years since receiving the terminal degree).

Participants

This study focused on the protégés of the DEMP. A total of 91 protégés were contacted and invited to participate in the electronic survey.

Survey Instrument

A survey was developed and administered electronically to all participants. Excluding demographic items, the survey consisted of 58 items formatted as Likert-type statements to which participants responded. The questionnaire was developed using the insights experienced by two mentors and a protégé that participated in the first iteration of the DEMP. Those insights are summarized in a paper describing the program (Barczyk, Buckenmeyer, and Feldman, 2010).

The questionnaire contained 72 closed-ended items, 58 of which related to the characteristics and outcomes of mentoring as well as to the quality management aspects of the DEMP. The questionnaire also contained 14 items that related to demographic issues.

Procedure

Four groups of protégés were surveyed, the first group having started in 2006. The protégés were instructed to access the questionnaire by clicking on the appropriate site in their Blackboard menu. This is a preliminary assessment of the data. The analysis that follows summarizes the data.

RESULTS

Demographics

Forty-seven individuals (representing a response rate of 51.1%) completed the questionnaire. All participants are or were professors or instructors at a university in a Midwestern state. The participants’ ages ranged from early 30s to over 66 years old, including 26 females and 18 males (3 non-respondents). Table 1 summarizes other demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Selected Demographic Characteristics of Participants Years of Experience in Higher Education

Mean = 16.14	
Online Teaching Experience	
Response	N
Yes	29
No	14
Did not respond	4
Protégés’ Academic Rank At Beginning Of Program	
Rank	N
Assistant Professor	16
Associate Professor	16
Full Professor	6
Associate Clinical Professor	1
Instructor	5
Did not respond	3

Likert Scale Values

A Likert scale was used as the primary method of response for the survey, where Strongly Agree was assigned a value of 4 and Strongly Disagree was assigned a value of 1.

Protégés Perception Of Satisfaction

The survey instrument included a section asking protégés to describe their level of satisfaction with the program. Table 2 summarizes participants’ responses. The mean response indicated an above average perception of satisfaction with the program.

Table 2: Protégés’ Perceptions Of Satisfaction

	Mean	N	Std. Dev.
Instructor certification achieved through the DEMP is a way to pursue continuous improvement.	3.40	45	.81
My opinions and suggestions for improvement in the DEMP were encouraged and welcomed.	3.22	45	.82
My opinions and suggestions offered during the DEMP were thoughtfully considered.	3.13	46	.80
Mentors used my feedback to improve the DEMP.	2.87	40	.69
I am satisfied with my overall experience in the DEMP.	3.26	43	.73

The survey included a section asking protégés to describe their perception of instructional improvement as a result of participation in the program. Table 3 summarizes participants’ responses. The mean response indicated an above average perception of improvement.

Table 3: Protégés' Perceptions Of Improvement

	Mean	N	Std. Dev.
My online teaching has improved as a result of participation in DEMP.	3.45	42	.67
My on-campus or traditional classroom teaching has improved as a result of participation in the DEMP.	2.95	43	.75
I have been able to apply the skills and knowledge acquired from the DEMP to my other courses.	3.51	45	.69
I have made changes to my other courses as a result of participating in the DEMP.	3.33	45	.71
The university has gained a competitive advantage as a result of my becoming a certified DE professional in my field of expertise.	3.22	46	.89

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Online learning embodies a large and continually growing segment of the market (Allen & Seaman, 2007). According to recent research, it is safe to conclude that demand for online education is increasing at a rate faster than the demand for traditional courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

To address this trend, university administrators erroneously assumed that having access to technology, such as an online course management system, would be enough to ensure that today's university students would learn about and with technology; that instructors would immediately begin using the technology and integrating it into their teaching. This has not happened as quickly or as effectively as hoped. If universities are to be successful at not only offering online courses, but increasingly offering quality online courses, instructors must have access to appropriate technologies and acquire technical competence in using such programs in their teaching. Changes in beliefs, not additional access or improvement in technical skills, is required for advancing into the higher levels of online integration.

It is interesting to note that the faculty members believe rather strongly that the university has gained a competitive advantage as a result of their participation in the program. It does make business sense for universities to invest some of their resources into the certification of its professors to teach online courses. This investment in professional development has the potential to reap substantial dividends. Our research illustrates why the DEMP is a valuable form of faculty development.

Satisfaction

Mentoring is "an interpersonal exchange between an experienced senior colleague (mentor) and a less experienced junior colleague (protégé) in which the mentor provides the protégé with career functions related to career advancement and psychosocial functions related to personal development" (Kram, 1988, as cited by Hu, Thomas, and Lance, 2008). In the DEMP, mentoring is the primary learning technique, which involves faculty who possess a superior knowledge of instructional design and online activities teaching professors newer or less experienced in online education. Particularly in industry, mentoring has been a positive and effective mode of learning for adults (Wexley and Latham, 2002). Career success, resilience to stress, and satisfaction with work are factors that have been associated with positive mentoring experiences (Bell 1998; Kram 1988). The study shows that protégés are satisfied with the DEMP experience. Not only is this evidenced in the survey results, but it is evidenced in the continuing success of the program, which is currently in its fifth year.

How faculty view their work affects whether it is done excellently, which ultimately impacts on the success (Seidman 1985) and perhaps on the competitive advantage of the university. The fact that protégés perceived the DEMP so highly on important elements of satisfaction is not only interesting, but it is beneficial. It provides an objective assessment of how faculty-customers perceive the experience. While the top management at Purdue University Calumet and the program designers may extol the virtues of the DEMP, these are not as critical as the perceptions of faculty members who participated as protégés. However, the fact that faculty overwhelmingly agree that they were satisfied with their experience and their courses improved as a result of participation speaks to the value of the DEMP.

University instructors are the true internal customers of the mentoring program. By insuring that programs such as the DEMP are perceived positively, the university enhances its identity (St. Clair 1994) and perhaps its competitive advantage.

SUMMARY

Investing in and continuing a program ought not to be done on a belief that it will be successful. It needs to be based on evidence that it is successful. Thus, managers, decision makers, and participants can then determine that their investments of time and other resources in a quality program are worthwhile and should either be continued and improved, or eliminated.

The results of this study confirm that the DEMP is effective. For those involved in university level faculty development programs, the implications indicate that assisting professors to be certified online instructors results in delivering high quality distance education courses. In tight economic and recessionary times when budgets for training and faculty development are sometimes reduced to relieve budgetary pressures, this is especially critical. Knowing that a program such as the DEMP has bottom-line benefits provides university decision makers with the information necessary to continue funding, and in the process, build quality faculty and online courses. An institution thus earns a distinct competitive advantage given the increasing number of students learning online.

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