

ORIENTATION, MENTORING AND ONGOING SUPPORT: A THREE-TIERED APPROACH TO ONLINE FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

In order for faculty to make a successful transition to teaching in the online classroom, they must receive professional development specifically geared toward this challenge. Bay Path College offers a faculty development program that incorporates three distinct components all geared toward aiding faculty to adjust to teaching online and providing assistance while courses are in progress with the goal of ultimately impacting the overall online learning experience for faculty and students alike. This article describes the College's three-tiered approach to faculty development and explains the role that initial training, peer mentoring, and ongoing support play in preparing faculty and shaping their confidence in their abilities as an online instructor.

KEYWORDS

Faculty development, online learning, mentoring, support, online faculty, orientation

I. INTRODUCTION

For the past eight years, online enrollments have been growing substantially faster than overall higher education enrollments [1]. While many institutions have been quick in recent years to adopt online education to support institutional growth and student needs, it is essential for institutions to also realize that, for faculty, teaching online is a new skill that must be developed. It is unreasonable to expect that faculty can enter the online classroom without any preparation and still be successful. When teaching online, faculty find themselves in the role of learning facilitator rather than lecturer and this change is one for which many faculty members find themselves unprepared [2, 3, 4].

A quality professional development experience can help faculty enter the online classroom with the skills, experience, and confidence they need to provide students with a valuable learning experience. Faculty development specifically designed to meet the needs of both the novice and experienced online instructor is key to the success of an online program [3, 5]. Organized faculty development programs are a critical factor in the successful transition to online teaching, and ongoing support, as well as continued professional development opportunities, allows experienced instructors to keep their skills current [4, 6]. Well-trained and supported faculty carry their skills into the online classroom resulting in an improved student experience and increased student satisfaction [7, 8]. The success of an institution's online program is the direct result of the positive training and support provided to faculty [3, 5, 9].

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In recent years, the number of institutions that have begun to provide training for their online faculty has increased. In a survey of chief academic officers in 2009, it was reported that 19% of all institutions did not provide any training. In 2011, this same survey reported a substantial decrease; of those surveyed, only 6% reported that no training was provided for faculty teaching online [1]. Although providing training to online faculty is increasingly more common, the approaches that various institutions take to provide this training are varied. A review of current literature reflects a wide variety of faculty trainings, orientations and other initiatives aimed at improving online faculty preparedness.

Including adjunct faculty in such trainings is critical to their success [3]. A Minneapolis-based online university, for example, provides training for online faculty that is designed specifically to address the duties of online adjunct faculty. A community college in Northern Florida, on the other hand, has developed a program that is focused on mentoring to keep the connection between full-time and part-time faculty alive [10].

Other institutions attempt to fulfill this training need by providing ongoing workshops for online faculty development [5, 11]. These faculty development initiatives have been conducted face to face, online, or in a hybrid format. The faculty development program at the College of Nursing at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for example, is a three-month program that combines face-to-face workshops with online sessions and technology classes [5].

The primary intents of these development initiatives are as varied as the institutions that provide them. The Digital Learning Faculty Certificate Program at Sacred Heart University, as an example, provides faculty with best practices in online instruction, communication and the appropriate use of technology tools [12]. The Distance Education Mentoring Program (DEMP) at Purdue University Calumet primarily focuses on educating and certifying faculty members in the principles of instructional design [13]. Walden University provides interactive online professional development workshops for faculty on topics such as the use of rubrics, APA and other topics based on recommendations provided by a survey of their faculty [8].

III. DEVELOPMENT OF THE EXCELLENCE IN ONLINE EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Bay Path College first began offering online programs in 2007 through its Graduate School. At that time the College developed its Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) to oversee the course development process and to provide support for online faculty and students. The CDL was originally part of the Academic Affairs division of the College and worked under the oversight of the Dean of the Graduate School. Today, the CDL is part of the Academic and Administrative Technology division of the College, but the connection with Academic Affairs helped to establish a positive working relationship with faculty and support from academic administration that has been key to the success of the CDL. The CDL's current position within the organization allows the unit a unique opportunity to efficiently address faculty support needs from both a technological and pedagogical perspective.

At its inception, the CDL considered the critical importance of properly preparing faculty to successfully transition to online learning. Quality faculty development is critical to the success of online programs and online students. Faculty who are well-trained are more likely to build courses that engage students and increase student achievement of learning outcomes [4]. Professional development offerings for faculty should be carefully planned, and should not simply consist of a single workshop or training session [3]. Bay Path College began preparing to support online instructors by developing a required orientation course and offering ongoing support to instructors. Unique to Bay Path, with fewer than 2500 students, is the fact that our approach to online faculty development is internally run; a recent survey shows that small institutions are least likely to provide internally-run training courses [1]. Our program is designed to meet the specific needs of our faculty and students and is offered in a supportive atmosphere that is

characteristic of the Bay Path College experience.

Over time, this program evolved into the institution's current Excellence in Online Education Initiative. This three-tiered approach to online faculty development strives to combine the types of orientation, mentoring and ongoing support offered at other institutions in a proactive fashion to ensure quality for all stakeholders. In developing this Initiative, the CDL carefully examined programs offered by other institutions and evaluated the options that were available at the time. In creating any faculty development program it is important to understand that different faculty have different professional development needs [3, 5]. The orientation course itself provides the same content to all participants; however, the overall professional development experience varies from one participant to the next. The addition of mentoring, the small number of participants who are engaged in the orientation at any given time, and the ongoing support components of the Initiative allow the CDL to provide a more customized experience to participants by allowing them to work one-on-one with the Instructional Designer and mentor to better support their individual needs.

IV. THE FACULTY ORIENTATION TO ONLINE EDUCATION

In order to ensure the quality of the courses developed and ultimately the quality of the students' online learning experience, the CDL created a faculty development course to train faculty in the art of teaching online. This course, known as the Faculty Orientation to Online Education, provides a mix of pedagogical and technical content. Although it is not the main focus of the Orientation, technology skill building needs to be incorporated into a faculty development program for online instructors because many faculty are not highly experienced or comfortable with technology [14]. This combination of providing pedagogical and technical training is essential in order to ensure that faculty are ready to enter the online classroom. It provides them with the technology skills they need to use the online learning environment to its full potential and also provides them with an understanding of how online education works and how it is different from face-to-face learning experiences [5]. It is essential for faculty to understand the relationship between technology, pedagogy and their course content in order to develop a high quality course [14].

The Orientation was designed to prepare faculty to teach online successfully as well as to help them design or modify the course that they would be teaching. Because faculty have many other professional responsibilities to manage, the CDL enrolls faculty into the Orientation during the semester before the one in which they are scheduled to teach online for the first time. This provides them with an adequate amount of time to prepare their course as well as provides an essential "just in time" learning experience [5, 14]. At the completion of the orientation, faculty members have the skills they need to teach online as well as a fully approved course that is ready to be made available to students.

When developed in 2007, the Faculty Orientation was designed to be a self-paced course in which the faculty member worked on a one-on-one basis with a CDL staff member. Although it was recognized that working together in a collaborative environment has advantages for achievement, motivation and satisfaction, the small number of faculty taking the orientation at that time did not allow for the preferable cohort-based model to be employed [3, 15]. As the College's online programs grew (see Figure 1), so did the number of faculty members needing to be prepared to teach online (see Figure 2). In the fall of 2010, the growth of the College's online programs allowed the CDL to rethink its faculty development strategies and revise the Faculty Orientation to better prepare faculty for the online classroom. Instead of enrolling faculty in the Orientation individually, regularly scheduled sessions could be offered with larger groups of participants, thus allowing for interaction among participants and a duplication of the online learning experience had by students in their courses. Providing participants with this experience is essential as it allows them a better understanding of what their students will experience in their online course [5].

The CDL also followed the basic precepts of adult learning theory in constructing its faculty development program. Faculty members are adult learners, and their needs are similar to those of other adult students. Adult learners prefer an educational experience that is relevant to their lives [16]. By including authentic

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assessments that engage the participant in building/modifying their course as they progress through the orientation, the CDL is providing a faculty development experience that is relevant to the learners. The orientation also utilized a student-centered, constructivist approach to training faculty to teach online. A constructivist approach allows learners to build upon their prior knowledge and explore topics they want or need to learn about in a facilitated environment [17]. Orientation facilitators, who include our Instructional Designer and experienced online faculty members, consistently model best practices by participating in the required discussions, maintaining a clear presence within the online classroom and providing timely feedback to participants, just as they will be expected to do with their students when their course commences [3, 4, 5, 18, 19].



Figure 1. Number of online courses offered by year.



Figure 2. Number of new faculty who completed the Orientation to Online Education course in preparation for teaching online for the first time, by year.

The Orientation provides faculty with an understanding of the pedagogical differences between online and face-to-face education and the technical skills necessary to fully utilize the tools within the learning management system and other online resources (see Figure 3). Each week of the Orientation contains

readings, discussions, and course development activities. The readings and discussions are based on the topic of the week, and the course development activities build upon the knowledge obtained through the readings and guide faculty through the process of constructing their online course.

Faculty Orientation to Online Education – Learning Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand how online learning supports the mission of Bay Path College• Apply the pedagogy of online education to the development and delivery of a high-quality course• Explain the unique profile and needs of the online learner• Adapt a course for online delivery with specific focus on student-centered teaching and learning• Create critical course content utilizing the learning management system (LMS)• Understand and integrate effective community building components into their online course• Construct individual and collaborative assignments and assessments aimed at online students• Demonstrate an effective understanding of online resources as well as relevant copyright and academic integrity concerns• Effectively communicate with and deliver feedback to online students• Utilize web 2.0 content in the online classroom• Recognize the unique challenges online teaching presents with regard to time management and working with students

Figure 3. Learning outcomes for the Faculty Orientation to Online Education

A. Orientation Content

The first half of the Orientation focuses on developing an understanding of online education. During this portion of the orientation, a number of critical topics are explored. Participants learn about the role of technology in the online classroom and the College's official policies regarding online education. Faculty explore the importance of developing community in an online learning environment, as well as developing their own online personality [20, 21, 22]. Backward design and student-centered learning environments are also explored [21, 23]. During this portion of the Orientation, faculty also develop their course plan by chunking their course objectives and content into the correct number of weeks or modules for their course. This course plan becomes the heart of the syllabus, which is then reviewed by the CDL's Instructional Designer and a content area expert (often a department chair) from the subject area in which the instructor is teaching. Following the reviews, modifications are made and once the syllabus is approved the faculty member moves on to developing his/her course.

Once faculty have an understanding of the basics of online learning and an approved syllabus, they then move into a week focused on learning the LMS. Faculty must have a thorough understanding of using the LMS and other technologies that will be used as they teach their course in order to ensure a smooth experience for both the faculty and students [14]. Bay Path College recently transitioned to the Canvas LMS from Instructure. Faculty members learn how to navigate the system, develop course content, use the multimedia tools, and grade assignments with the rubric and SpeedGrader tools. This overview of the LMS leads into opportunities to practice these new skills by creating course discussions, content pages and assignments.

The final weeks of the Orientation continue to develop faculty members' understanding of teaching online with readings and discussions focused on developing their course in the online classroom and making the transition to teaching their course. Faculty learn about developing assessments and collaborative activities for their course [19, 22]. They also learn about strategies for working with online learners, for managing time successfully while teaching online, and for effectively participating in the online classroom [23, 21].

Issues relating to the use of additional resources and copyright are also explored [24]. Throughout these final weeks, faculty are also constructing their courses in the LMS, writing their discussion questions, constructing activities to assess student achievement of the prescribed learning outcomes, and finding online tools and content to include as supplemental resources for students.

B. Role of the Instructional Designer

The role of Instructional Designer within the CDL is critical to Bay Path College's three-tiered approach to online faculty development. The close working relationship between the Instructional Designer and faculty members that begins during the Orientation reinforces the fact that support is available when needed. Throughout the Orientation, the participants interact with the Instructional Designer regularly. She facilitates some of the Orientation's asynchronous discussions, along with other members of the CDL staff and experienced online faculty, and provides regular, personalized feedback to the faculty members as they construct their course. This personalized feedback helps to differentiate the Orientation experience for various participants based upon their previous knowledge and skill levels [3, 5]. There are many benefits in incorporating an Instructional Designer into an online faculty development program. In addition to providing an organizational framework for online courses, an Instructional Designer can also serve as an "editor" for the courses, maintaining consistency across programs and promoting best practices throughout the teaching community [25].

The Orientation ends at least four weeks before the first course session in which the participants are scheduled to teach. This allows time for course reviews and modifications to occur. At the conclusion of the orientation, a two-part review occurs similar to that which was done to the syllabus. The course is reviewed by the Instructional Designer to ensure that it meets course structure, navigation and other requirements as outlined in the CDL Academic Policies. Once the course is approved by the CDL, the content area expert who reviewed the syllabus reviews the completed course, comparing the approved syllabus to the course created in the LMS. The content area expert makes sure that the assessments in the course are appropriately designed to assess students' achievement of the learning outcomes for the course. Once the course is approved by both the CDL and the content area expert, it is ready to be offered to students. This thorough review allows the CDL and the College to ensure the quality of the online courses offered to students across all programs.

V. MENTORING

While working with the Instructional Designer during the Orientation provides faculty with access to an important support resource, connecting them to an experienced online instructor is also essential. Mentoring is a vital part of the online faculty development process and it comprises the second tier of the Excellence in Online Education Initiative. Access to a mentor provides faculty with an experienced colleague who can share his/her experiences of what works and does not work in an online classroom [25]. A recent study on institutional efforts to support online faculty showed that experienced faculty members wanted to share their teaching successes and methodologies with others [26]. Including a mentoring component in the Orientation provides benefits to both the experienced instructor and the Orientation participant. New instructors learn tips and strategies and learn from the experience of their skilled counterparts, while veteran online faculty are asked to reflect upon their experiences in sharing with new instructors [3].

At the onset of the Orientation, faculty participants are assigned a mentor. This mentor is an experienced instructor who is teaching an online course during the same session as the Orientation. The Orientation participant is enrolled in the mentor's course with guest observer level access. During the first week of the Orientation, one of the assignments is to view the mentor's course and look at the syllabus, discussions in progress, and the overall structure of the course. This course serves as a model for participants in creating their own course. It gives them a sample of what a quality course looks like and also allows them to interact with the instructor of that course to further increase their understanding of

quality course design [5].

VI. ONGOING SUPPORT SERVICES

The final tier of the Excellence in Online Education Initiative is the ongoing support that is provided to online faculty after the Orientation concludes. The Instructional Designer, as well as other CDL staff members, provides support for all faculty in the use of the LMS as well as additional pedagogical support for faculty members seeking to revise and improve their course, looking for better ways to engage their students, and adding new activities into an existing course. The Instructional Designer checks in on courses in progress to ensure that faculty members are participating and that they are properly utilizing the tools within the LMS. New online instructors' courses are checked regularly and constructive feedback is offered to assist the faculty member in making a successful transition to teaching in the online classroom. The CDL reserves the right to check in on experienced online instructors' courses at their discretion in order to ensure continued adherence to College policies and to offer assistance to faculty members when needed. These course checks are not designed to be formal course evaluations, but rather are intended to provide support for the faculty member and students in the online classrooms. This type of support aids faculty by providing the ongoing professional development and technical assistance they need to be successful [4].

Support services that the CDL provides for students also help faculty focus on their teaching. The CDL staffs an Online Student Support Coordinator who facilitates the required student Orientation to Online Learning course and also provides ongoing assistance to students including technology support and assistance in developing strategies to be a successful online student [21]. With the CDL staff providing these support services, students do not need to rely on their instructors when they have non-content related questions. This allows instructors to focus more of their time on task on course content and instruction.

VII. FACULTY SATISFACTION WITH CDL SUPPORT SERVICES

Since the launch of the Faculty Orientation to Online Education in the fall of 2007 until the fall of 2011, the CDL successfully prepared 106 faculty members to teach online. Following the Orientation, faculty are asked to complete a survey and share their thoughts on the Orientation experience. Overall, 84% of faculty completing the survey felt more prepared for teaching online following the orientation. Seventy-six percent of Orientation participants felt that the content contained in the Orientation, and the overall experience, were valuable to their professional growth. One anonymous survey respondent noted, "I found Bay Path's Orientation to Online Education to be more thorough and substantive than the previous training that I received [at another institution]," and another stated, "I cannot say enough about what the CDL means to me as a faculty person and to the students in my classes."

Faculty have also expressed a higher level of satisfaction with the current, cohort-based model of the orientation over the original, self-paced version. In a post-orientation survey, faculty were asked to indicate their perception of their level of preparedness to teach online after taking the orientation. On a five-point likert scale, the mean response from faculty who participated in the original version of the orientation was 3.6; the mean response to date from faculty in the new version of the orientation is 4.7. Faculty also report being highly satisfied with the support they receive from the CDL staff. In our survey, one instructor noted, "I feel that I have the tools I need to get my classes ready, and the support if something goes wrong," and another stated, "I found the support remarkable and I could not do this without the support." The CDL plays a critical role in preparing faculty to make the transition into teaching online, and faculty come to rely on this support as their progress through their online teaching experiences at the College.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to their constituents to provide a high-quality online educational experience. It is essential that these institutions recognize that for many faculty teaching

online is still a new skill that must be developed. Quality professional development opportunities for both novice and experienced online educators are key to the success of any online program [3, 4, 5]. A faculty development approach that includes an initial training, mentorship, and ongoing support helps to ensure a positive experience for all involved in online learning programs.

At Bay Path College, the three-tiered Excellence in Online Education Initiative has been successful in preparing faculty for their first online teaching experience. The Orientation to Online Education provides faculty with a solid understanding of online education while simultaneously pairing them with experts to assist with course design and with the adjustment to the online environment. The ongoing support provided by the CDL ensures that faculty receive just-in-time assistance and that the online offerings meet the same standards and expectations as the College's traditional offerings. A well-trained and supported online faculty is an important component in online education; Bay Path College's Excellence in Online Education Initiative successfully helps to ensure that faculty are prepared to rise to the challenge.

IX. ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Amber L. Vaill is the Director of Academic Technology and Online Learning at Bay Path College. She helped to establish the College's Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) in 2007, and developed the student orientation course that is required for all online students, as well as the faculty development program for all online faculty. In her current position, she leads the team on campus that provides technology support and training to all faculty, students and staff, both on campus and online. She is a Ph.D. candidate in Education at Northcentral University and is specializing in e-learning.

Peter A. Testori is the Assistant Director of Online Learning Support at Bay Path College. He is responsible for facilitating support to faculty teaching online and hybrid courses and to students using online learning tools. He is responsible for the oversight of online student support, including the required Orientation to Online Learning course and the online student support coordinators at the College. He is a graduate of Central Connecticut State University where he earned his master of science in student development/higher education.

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