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Positioning Faculty Support as a Strategy in Assuring Quality Online Education

by Hong Wang, Lawrence V. Gould, and Dennis King

Over the past decade, online education has become increasingly popular in American higher education. The Sloan Consortium ([Sloan-C](#)) surveys (Allen and Seaman [2003](#), [2004](#), [2005](#), [2006](#), and [2007](#)) demonstrate that online education has come into the mainstream of U.S. higher education. This growth creates unique needs for institutions and faculty members. Oblinger and Hawkins ([2006](#)), noting that developing effective online courses requires pedagogical and technical expertise that few faculty members possess, point out that "institutions that are sincere about providing high-quality, flexible educational experiences are finding that teams—not individuals—develop and deliver the most effective online courses" (15). Institutions must work to provide faculty members with the support they need, in the form of instructional design resources, technical assistance, and administrative structure, to design and teach quality online courses.

Fort Hays State University ([FHSU](#)), one of six universities administered by the Kansas Board of Regents, is experiencing these trends firsthand; the number of online students at FHSU grew by a factor of six between 2000 and 2008, and the university currently offers 10 master's and 18 bachelor's degree programs entirely online. Since its first offering of distance courses in the 1990s, FHSU has seen three waves of development in distance learning with the most recent focusing on quality assurance. During the first two waves of distance learning course development, most faculty members created their own courses as "Lone Rangers" (Bates [1997](#)), receiving little institutional support for instructional design. Now, the university is focusing on a team approach to course development that fosters collaboration and provides support and encouragement to faculty members who teach online.

Course Development at FHSU

The first wave of distance learning course development at FHSU began in the mid-1990s, when the university encouraged faculty members to develop and offer more distance learning courses to meet the growing demand for such options. Most of these first-wave courses, which were delivered online and via Internet protocol television (IPTV), were developed individually by faculty members working independently. In the late 1990s, the second wave of course development responded to advancing technologies and the need for courses that would allow students to complete academic programs and earn degrees entirely off-campus. As in the first wave, the emphasis in the second wave of course development was on increasing the quantity of courses available with the added aim of producing comprehensive off-campus programs for degree completion. Course development for both waves tended to rely on the pedagogy and technology of the traditional on-campus teaching environment and text-based learning.

In the early 21st century as new technological tools made the administration of high-quality online courses and programs increasingly easy and affordable, the focus at FHSU turned toward quality in distance education courses. This emphasis on quality assurance stands in stark contrast to the previous emphasis on "coaxing as many people and as many courses as possible onto the Internet" (Lorenzetti 2004, 1). In order to meet the changing needs of the university and compete in the market to attract online learners, FHSU embarked on a third wave of online course and program development that incorporated two major improvements: quality assurance and a team approach to the course development process.

Several changes at FHSU have enabled the turn toward quality; key developments have included the university's participation in the Academic Quality Improvement Program ([AQIP](#)) beginning in 2000 and, in the past two to three years, a series of training events. Four faculty members completed the [Quality Matters](#)

peer-course review training in Maryland, and FHSU engaged an institutional quality assurance initiative in online course development. In support of this initiative, the Quality Matters training team worked with staff at FHSU's Center for Teaching Excellence and Learning Technologies ([CTELT](#)) and a group of faculty members to develop course design guidelines for all online courses at FHSU. In 2007, the Provost's Council of Deans; [Virtual College](#), the administrative unit that administers distance learning courses at the university; and CTELT worked together to develop new course development procedures.

As a result of these efforts, FHSU has developed a team approach to online course development, similar to Covington, Petherbridge, and Warren's ([2005](#)) triangulated support model ([Exhibit 1](#)), that depends on effective collaboration across the university's administrative, professional, and peer-support systems.

Administrative Support

Faculty satisfaction is one of the five pillars of quality online education identified by Sloan-C (Sloan-C [n.d.](#)). In order to facilitate better online course development, university administrators need to understand the elements contributing to faculty satisfaction with online teaching. Thompson ([2003](#)) identifies several factors that contribute to faculty members' satisfaction, including an adequate technical support infrastructure that facilitates training and support for online instruction and an institutional reward structure that recognizes quality online instruction.

An important aspect of administrative support to ensure faculty satisfaction at FHSU has been the involvement of academic chairs in the quality assurance process. The chairs' involvement was increased in an effort to address the specific needs of individual departments and to respond to faculty members' concerns regarding academic freedom and a lack of content knowledge among the instructional design support team. While the CTELT instructional design team confirms the quality of a new course is based on design- and technology-related components, the chairs play an important role in confirming the quality of course content and curriculum.

The Technical Support Infrastructure

To meet faculty members' technical support needs, FHSU has made staffing and organizational changes designed to build a stronger technical and organizational infrastructure. The university added a course management system (CMS) support specialist to the Computing and Telecommunication Center ([CTC](#)) staff, and separate coordinators for teaching excellence and faculty development have joined CTELT. The CMS support specialist provides high-level technology support for FHSU's CMS and other online learning technologies. The teaching excellence coordinator, a professor with considerable teaching experience at FHSU who works at CTELT part-time, consults with faculty members on instructional strategies for ensuring teaching excellence. The faculty development coordinator oversees the provision of new faculty orientation workshops and peer sharing programs, works on instructional evaluations, and participates in other faculty support projects as needed.

CTELT has also been reorganized into two teams: an instructional design and course support team and a media production team. The director of CTELT is now the director of instructional design and course support, a change designed to reflect the center's new focus on faculty support in course development and technology integration. In order to meet the growing needs in course development support, CTELT's former technology support specialist now also works as an instructional designer, providing faculty members with both pedagogical and technical support. The media production team is led by the former video production specialist who is now also assigned the title of media production coordinator.

Institutional Rewards

As Thompson (2003) points out, developing and teaching online courses is more time intensive than face-to-face instruction; as a result, compensation is one of the motivators that can influence a faculty member's decision to teach online (Maguire 2005; Shea 2007). To compensate faculty members for the increased effort that developing online courses entails, FHSU has set aside funds to reward faculty members who take one or more of three online course development pathways. Pathway I, new course development, pays up to \$3,000. Pathway II, course redevelopment, pays from \$600 to \$2,000, depending on the degree to which an existing course is enhanced or overhauled. Pathway III is for faculty members who have brought courses to FHSU from other institutions. Although these courses have not gone through FHSU's standard course development process, faculty course developers are paid \$500 for classes that meet the university's course development guidelines.

Other forms of recognition and reward are also important in motivating faculty members to teach online, including tenure consideration (Bourne and Moore 2002; Maguire 2005; Thompson 2003). Tenure-track faculty are pulled in many directions, forced to divide their attention between teaching, research, and service. Traditionally, the awarding of tenure depends primarily on classroom teaching, research, and publication performance; at FHSU, however, the tenure process specifically rewards instructors who spend extra time developing courses and teaching online. Faculty members are also rewarded for pursuing training in course development; instructors who complete all sessions in a CTELT workshop series receive a certificate from the Office of the Provost that can be included in their tenure portfolios.

Professional Support

Classroom teaching is different from online instruction, and the differences between the two modes are mirrored in both course development and delivery processes. Developing an online course forces an instructor to think through the process, structure, interaction, and assessment components of the course (Anderson et al. 2001). In developing an online course, as with any course, the instructor must build curriculum materials, develop lecture notes and mini-lectures, and design learning activities; in delivering a course, instructors must respond to questions, motivate students to participate, and evaluate and monitor student learning outcomes (Coppola, Hiltz, and Rotter 2002). Online instructors face additional issues in content presentation, instructor-student and student-student interaction, student accountability, and assessment (Lowe 2008). They also face the challenges of playing multiple roles in the online environment (Berge 1995; Headley 2005) and fostering social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence ([Exhibit 2](#)); all of these components are necessary to encourage effective online learning (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2000).

With these additional challenges in mind, CTELT has taken a comprehensive approach to supporting faculty members in course design and online teaching, producing a course development reference manual ([Exhibit 3](#)), offering several different workshops on course development and online teaching ([Exhibit 4](#)), and providing self-paced online orientations for adjunct and new faculty members ([Exhibit 5](#)). CTELT also maintains a blog on course design and Web-based instruction ([Exhibit 6](#)).

All of these elements feed into the center's team approach to supporting faculty members during the course development process. The support process begins after the instructor signs a course development contract; at that point, an instructional designer begins to assemble a course development support team. Although the specific composition of the team may vary depending on the needs of the particular course and the resources available, a course development support team generally includes a project manager, a faculty course developer, an instructional designer, a graphics and animation specialist, a video production specialist, and a media services specialist.

Peer Support

In order to create a campus culture that encourages faculty members to share experiences in course development and online teaching, FHSU has relied on what Rogers (2003) calls "innovators" and "early adopters" to motivate more faculty members to develop quality online courses. To help these early adopters spread the word, CTELT has coordinated a series of roundtable sessions on a variety of topics related to course development, course design, and online teaching. Academic chairs, course development support teams, and experienced online instructors facilitated these discussions, which drew 88 faculty and staff participants in the fall of 2008. Recordings of the major points of these events have been made available to the greater faculty community via [podcasts](#).

In addition to facilitating peer sharing and offering support programs, such as brown bag lunches and roundtable discussions, CTELT has also invited faculty members to present workshops. Two experienced online instructors regularly teach workshops in the online course development track. One of these faculty presenters has attended the Quality Matters training workshops and uses advanced Web-based instruction tools in her own teaching. The other faculty member has extensive experience in creating and utilizing rubrics in online learning assessment.

With the advancement of telecommunication technologies, the reach of peer sharing and support efforts is not limited to a particular institution but can extend to faculty members and experts across the country (and, indeed, the world). CTELT has taken advantage of this potential by sponsoring a series of webinars that offer FHSU faculty the opportunity to learn from online educators outside of their own institution. From January 2007 to the present, webinars, such as Supporting Adjunct Faculty Online, Course Redesign, Aligning Faculty Incentives with Shifting Modes of Delivery, Assessing and Supporting Adult Learners, Quality Matters: Does Your Online Course Meet the Standards?, and Increasing Cognitive Engagement in the Online Classroom, have drawn faculty members to the CTELT computer lab and conference room to learn from experts outside FHSU.

Faculty Member Response

The faculty support model that CTELT has developed has been effective in maintaining high-quality online education at FHSU; a large part of that success has been faculty members' positive response to the center's efforts. In January 2009, CTELT conducted a needs-assessment survey intended to explore where the center needed to improve services. Instead of identifying weak spots, respondents, all faculty members who attended CTELT workshops, expressed overwhelmingly their satisfaction with CTELT services; representative comments include:

- I attended almost every workshop CTELT offers. I feel fairly well equipped at this point.
- I think CTELT/FHSU is great at faculty support—so they exceed my expectations.
- CTELT is doing an excellent job supporting faculty. I have had nothing but good experiences.

The feedback from faculty course developers, gathered from anecdotal evidence and informal communication, has also been similarly positive. One faculty course developer expressed his thanks to the instructional designer assigned to his course in an e-mail: "It has been really great to get your assistance and feedback on the course design. I showed my on-campus students the online course I developed for the spring and they also liked the format I used. Thank you for all your help." Another faculty member wrote to his instructional design team: "I appreciate your help and suggestions in developing my new course. I'm excited to work with the graphic designer to provide some exciting animations and graphics to the course."

Clearly, these faculty members have found CTELT's support valuable as they learned to develop and administer innovative online courses. They have also appreciated the increased involvement of academic department chairs in the quality assurance process.

Conclusion

Online education has forever transformed higher education by breaking down the physical walls of the classroom and forcing faculty members and institutions to refocus the paradigms and rethink the scholarship of teaching. Faculty and staff members at FHSU have found that a collaborative course development process can produce online courses that implement new technologies effectively, provide adequate interaction among learners, and present an online curriculum that meets the criteria for quality online education. Our development and quality assurance processes consistently result in courses that are, to borrow Porter's (2004) summary of criteria, "well-structured, innovative, filled with usable and appropriate course content, and interesting to a variety of people who take each course and work through a series of classes" (75). If FHSU's online education is to remain competitive, faculty members must continue to receive the ongoing support they need to develop and administer meaningful online learning experiences for students with different learning styles and knowledge levels. These efforts require continued collaboration among university administrators, faculty support staff, and faculty peers.

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