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Faculty Development – The Critical Element

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Faculty development is a complex idea, often misunderstood, but not at the University of Mississippi where the key to faculty development is clear – instructional design is the critical element of faculty development. Instructional design and instructional designers are considered necessary to quality online education. Instructional designers are involved in all aspects of faculty development from first efforts of professors to ongoing strategies for course enrichment.

An organization's commitment to quality online education can probably be determined by asking one question – what is the institution's level of commitment to appropriate and research-based instructional design strategies?

Instructional design is defined as an organized and systematic procedure that includes the steps of analyzing, designing, development, implementing and evaluating instruction (Dick, Carey & Carey, 2015). This long-standing definition is being applied at The University of Mississippi where the University's commitment to online education has grown and become more mission central. The key to efforts is the use of instructional designers working with faculty to apply scientifically based instructional design strategies as courses are designed.

The University's Division of Outreach and Continuing Education has created a team, simply called Academic Outreach (AO), that works closely with the academic departments and faculty in course planning, design, and support. The AO team offers a variety of services and resources to University of Mississippi faculty who are teaching online courses, and to those who are preparing themselves to do so in the future (http://elearning.olemiss.edu/).

1

There are several strategies that Academic Outreach is utilizing to ensure that faculty are given the support and tools needed to design, develop, and deliver courses. These strategies can be organized into three categories:

1. faculty development for online instruction,
2. online course and program support and,
3. grants and awards.

Academic Outreach and Faculty Development

Professors, full-time and adjunct, who plan to teach online at University of Mississippi must first be endorsed by Academic Outreach. The endorsement process uses an online training course that focuses on the pedagogy of distance education and online teaching. This course introduces and explains the best practices for online teaching.

The first three weeks of the online course focus on the theory of distance education, supporting literature, and models of best practice. After three weeks, faculty have the opportunity to interact with peers in a number of discussion forums. They are also tested on key terms and concepts in distance education and are asked to prepare a syllabus for an online course.

Faculty use the second portion of the online faculty development course to build their first lesson/unit/module. They use a sandbox—an offline area of the course management system where courses can be developed. It is also at this time that content, activities, and assessments are created.

Faculty also prepare a course map and upload it into their sandbox. They are asked to demonstrate techniques promoting student engagement, instructor interaction, and communication in their new course. The goal of this portion of the faculty development process

2

is to ensure that upon completion of the six weeks course, faculty are familiar with the University's online course policies, are able to create a syllabus, and have the beginnings of a course that is compliant according to the University's guidelines.

Professors also become familiar with available teaching tools so they are ready to teach online. At this point, successful completers are endorsed to teach online.

Academic Outreach Support

Faculty development does not end with endorsement. There are additional resources and support offered to faculty such as workshops, consultations with designers, and support and help available on an as needed basis.

At the University of Mississippi, faculty support falls under the designation of Course Enrichment. Currently in the pilot stage, the Course Enrichment Program consists of a team of faculty that review online courses using a best practices rubric. Once a course has been reviewed, a report is sent to the course's instructor and the course is assigned to one of Academic Outreach's instructional designers.

The designer and professor meet and develop an action plan that implements course enrichment activities—all to be completed in a six-month period. The Course Enrichment Program is new, but it will be fully implemented in the next year and courses will be regularly reviewed and instructional designers will assist faculty in the enrichment process. The Course Enrichment Program serves to ensure that: courses are both ADA and copyright compliant, are designed effectively with emphases on social and cognitive presence, and are designed to encourage student engagement.

3

Grants

Academic Outreach also offers grants and awards to promote online teaching and learning. For example, the "Virtual Conference" presented by University of Idaho, February 12-23, 2018 is available for faculty to access at any time. A WOW Grant is intended to allow the instructor of an online course the time and resources to integrate new or advanced techniques or technologies into their existing online course. The Paragon Award is one that annually recognizes excellence in distance teaching. Finally, there is the travel grant category that encourages faculty to travel to explore distance, online, blended, or hybrid education at other institutions.

Academic Outreach is committed to a continuing effort that ensures that faculty have the support and tools they need to design, develop and deliver courses. For the Academic Outreach team, faculty development is the critical element that insures quality online instruction, and instructional design is the critical element of faculty development.

References:

Dick, W., Carey, L. & Carey, J. (2015) The systematic design of instruction. Boston: Pearson.

4