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Highlights from Syllabus Magazine

Faculty on the Move: Rethinking Faculty Support Services

Mark L. Fink

The demands on faculty who use technology in teaching, course administration, and communications continue to increase. Here, Mark Fink outlines The University of Toledo's approach to faculty support.

The administrative tasks involved in ensuring that faculty can develop for-credit, undergraduate, and graduate courses to instruct students at a distance can often prove daunting. Faculty must re-examine every method of teaching their bricks-and-mortar course and learn enough technology to effectively engage students in the learning process. Not only must faculty have the technology necessary to communicate with students, they must assist students who may lack the technological skills to perform various tasks—all within the context of a field where technological tools often outpace the faculty's time to learn them.

This experience, felt by many higher education institutions, prompted a reorganization of faculty development at the University of Toledo's Division of Distance Learning. The division, an outreach arm of the university, is charged with enabling the university's eight colleges to develop courses through various distance education delivery media.
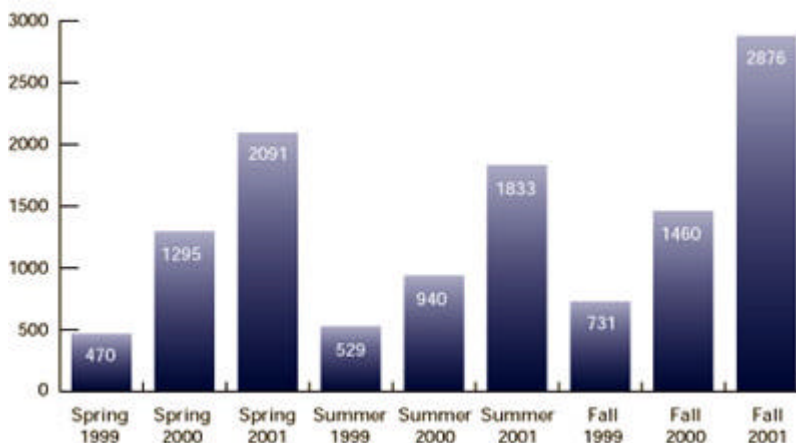
Student Enrollment Growth by Semester

* Enrollment as of 10/11/2001

Phenomenal Growth

Growth in the division from its inception in 1995 to the present is exceptional. Comparing enrollment from a term in one academic year to the same term the following year reveals that twice as many students are enrolled (see chart, below). The growth of faculty teaching courses via distance education also increased significantly. In the past year alone, more than 20 faculty members have ventured into the distance education arena. Making any reorganization even more imperative is the impact of faculty teaching more courses. Typically, faculty taught one or two courses per term. Today, faculty are teaching upwards of 21 courses per academic year. The exponential nature of doubling enrollments, new faculty, and faculty teaching more courses, moved the Instructional Design team evaluate its faculty development operations.

This unparalleled growth of enrollment for courses delivered via distance education also prompted a restructuring of the services available to faculty. This growth expanded the number of faculty teaching students at a distance, a vast increase in courses offered, and new degree, degree completion, and specialized programs. The distance education growth experienced by the university prompted the senior instructional systems designer to evaluate practices and operations. During the evaluation process, it became apparent that a unique faculty development model would have to allow faculty to focus on instruction by providing a full range of services to faculty, including expanding student support services.

Back in the early stages of the division, it was achievable for faculty to develop courses by being trained in all aspects of course development. Technology skills were shared with faculty that would enable them to "do it all." Using mid-level software applications, course management skills (e.g., loading students into a course), and increasing faculty knowledge in instructional systems design (ISD), faculty were compelled to manage a diverse range of tasks, and were therefore limited in the time available for instructing other courses.

Needs Assessment

The evaluative process made it clear that faculty could not continue to "do it all." While a handful of faculty enjoyed continuously learning new technological skills and Web devices, the majority did not have the time or motivation to be all things to all courses. Therefore, it was determined by the needs assessment that a reorganization of the process was necessary for continued success. The needs assessment found that faculty desired to spend their already compressed time focusing on interacting with students, rather than spending hours designing hypermedia for distance education delivery.

Additionally, the assessment found that faculty with more time to focus on content could provide greater creativity in reaching students through superior interaction, improved sequencing of content, enhanced assessment instruments, and innovative group projects that stimulate the students' cognitive gain.

In searching for an operational model that would work in the context of the division of distance learning, it became evident that no such model existed: The division is self-supporting, the courses are taught by faculty approved by their respective college and department, and the technologies utilized vary by course.

The growth and the analysis proved two things. First, the self-supporting nature of the division required an implementation that merged corporate instructional design operations with those of high education. Not only did instructional design services necessitate following a corporate model (using ROI, CBA, etc.); it had to maintain the rigorous standards of instructional design practices for the academy. The instructional design work completed at the university had to increase in efficiency and effectiveness. The task of transitioning a team of instructional designers, visual artists, network specialists, and instructors required that faculty were no longer perceived only as colleagues, but as clients.

The assessment proved that any re-engineering should follow standards of the corporate community. The standards as defined by the American Society of

Training and Development (ASTD) were incorporated with the standards set by education through the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) and the best practices recommended by the American Federation of Teachers.

Client Services Approach

After evaluating the needs assessment and standards, it was determined that the division could serve faculty and students best by providing a complete range of client services. This includes a laundry list of services to enable faculty—and students—to have the greatest opportunity to engage in the process of learning within the virtual walls of the academy. In assisting faculty in course development, the ISD team can create a complete course for the faculty member, including an ISD design, Web-based content pages, photography, graphical imaging, original artwork, animation, video, audio, and other related services for the course.

Given such a dramatic shift in distance learning operations, it was necessary that the structure reflect the philosophical shift to faculty-as-client. The Client Services Model (CSM) provides a unique perspective at developing courses to be taught at a distance by consulting with clients to ensure that the needs of the students, the faculty, and the university are met.

Several considerations were made in developing this model. As the division is responsible for providing distance education opportunities for all the colleges, dividing Instructional Design work by college appeared logical at first glance. After investigating this possibility, it was determined that there would not be a transfer of knowledge across disciplines. For example, if an instructional designer working for a client in the physical sciences designed a problem-based learning (PBL) instrument, the instrument—or a component of that instrument—might prove beneficial in a social science. Although this works well in higher education, cross-disciplinary design still had to be managed like a corporate ISD Department. Because of faculty constraints on time, it was necessary that faculty know whom to ???contact to resolve a certain issue. Although that instructional designer may have the answer for the client, the client is responsible for seeing that the person responsible for the issue within the division is informed.

Faculty Process

Although it appears that the CSM requires a larger staff, the staffing is comparatively less than many institutions with fewer courses. When a faculty member is confirmed as teaching a distance learning course, the director of distance learning notifies the IT specialist. The senior instructional designer assigns an instructional systems design team for the client. The team consists of an instructional systems designer with formal knowledge in learning theories partnered with a visual/digital artist. Next, the instructional design team schedules an orientation meeting with the new client explaining the services available from the Division of Distance Learning.

The client is the content expert, the mentor, the instructor, and the director of the course. The orientation includes training on the course portal used and "homework." The client considers the new possibilities that the delivery media will provide for course interaction and presentation, or discovers what will not transfer well from the traditional classroom. Although printed materials are given to all clients at this orientation, each meeting varies based on the characteristics of the client, the course, and the objectives of the instructional materials. Meetings with the client continue on a regular basis to provide continuous quality improvements.

Client Tools

As the faculty transformed into full-service clients, an opportunity arose to provide a new set of tools relating to their focus of instruction. Several tools were created and still undergo continuous improvements.

Clients who teach students at a distance were often isolated within their department and previously were unable to share their adventure with colleagues in other disciplines. Therefore, a Web-based faculty forum was created with a chat room, bulletin board, a showcase, and a series of content areas providing the latest research in teaching via distance education. This forum became particularly useful for faculty who teach courses from locations in China, Kenya, and Hawaii.

Unloading clients from the burden of acquiring high tech skills was imperative to the success of the model. While faculty are still free to "do it all" if they choose, they have overwhelmingly appreciated the ISD team's services. Some of the services eliminated entire tasks previously relegated to the faculty, while other services provided more efficient methods of completing the same tasks. Previously, faculty had to load their own administrative data into each course they instructed. Today, the division loads students for the client. Previously, each question of an assessment instrument had to be entered into a question databank, whereas today faculty can either use File Transfer Protocol to transfer an entire quiz to the portal or send their quiz (in Microsoft Corp. Word, or via e-mail or fax) to their ISD team for entry. Previously, faculty had to know how to build all content within the portal of their course. Today, clients meet with their ISD team, explain what they need, and review high tech courses created through a unique partnership between the client and ISD team.

Student Support

In order for clients to engage students in academic discourse, it was necessary for student support services to be the responsibility of the division. While a full range of student services exists within the division, the instructional design department of the division provides technical support. Support for students and faculty is provided through a Web-based "help" and support area, e-mail, and a toll-free telephone number. In addition, the ISD team is developing a knowledge database for the Web, a support chat room, a Web cam support area, and a complete course for students providing study strategies for academic success in any course taken at a distance.

While it may appear that student support has nothing to do with faculty development, the reality is that students are central to success. A student who is under-prepared to engage in a distance learning course impacts the quality of the instruction that the faculty is able to provide to others in the virtual classroom. By providing technical support and prerequisite skills to students, faculty spend less time teaching non-content skills, and more time interacting with students.

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