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LINKING ACADEMIC QUALITY TO ONLINE FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION

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Summary

Many institutions are initiating or expanding online degree programming in order to meet demand from students and/or maintain market share. Park University in the U.S. enrolls over 26,000 online learners annually. With 8,000 enrollments each 8-week term and limits on class size, the institution now hires 300 part-time instructors each term. All online instructors must complete a six-week online training course prior to receiving their first teaching assignment. The shift in course delivery mode requires new approaches to assuring academic quality. The original **Online Instructor Evaluation System** in 2004 included four formative reviews and one summative review. It provided 1:1 coaching to instructors and richly detailed reports. Yet as enrollments grew, instructor numbers exceeded the available evaluation personnel resources. In 2007 the **Quick Check** tool was implemented, focusing only on critical elements of online teaching. Using this instrument, we were able utility. Therefore in 2008 we introduced the comprehensive but streamlined **Faculty Online Observation**. Conference participants are warmly invited to attend this session to consider our tools, and share their own ideas and experiences in these areas. This session will engage participants in dialogue to explore mutual interests.

Introduction

Many colleges and universities now are offering online degree programs in addition to the traditional campus-based programs. In some instances the growth has occurred quickly, enabled by technological advances and student demand. In order to comply with accreditation bodies and ensure quality, institutions must develop systems for monitoring their online programs. In this session we will explore three different approaches that might be of interest to colleagues elsewhere. For example, an institution with a young online program, yet with ample resources, might prefer a robust, relatively complex system that provides detailed reports and a great deal of professional development for the online instructor. However, it requires considerable time and resources to implement. An institution with a large program, well established policies, and fewer resources might apply an approach that combines high efficiency with less detailed reporting and limited professional development. Finally, an institution with program and resources of moderate size might take an approach that affords both efficiency and professional development for the instructors. These three approaches will be discussed with respect to their use in a variety of situations.

The Setting

Park University, located in America's heartland, was founded in 1875 as a private liberal arts college. It began offering online classes in 1996 with an initial online enrollment of 20 students recognized the need for new processes and systems to address student complaints and academic honesty issues. Also the university needed an evaluation system that was based on what online instructors were trained and expected to do.

These factors gained prominence as the university began to rely heavily on part-time instructors. Online enrollment presently exceeds 26,000 students annually. Park conducts five eight-week terms during the calendar year, mostly to meet the needs of working adults. Park now sees 8,000 enrollments every term, resulting in some 40,000 enrollments annually. Approximately 300 contractual instructors are hired each term to teach online.

In the early years many of these part-time instructors were new to our institution, or teaching, or teaching online, or any combination of these. Park University was challenged to maintain academic quality and consistency of instruction. Instructor training initially was sparse. However, with the growth in our online enrollments, the administration resolved to promote academic rigor by allocating substantial resources to faculty training, mentoring, and evaluation. We enacted a research-based system of criteria and standards for evaluation, to ensure that our instructors are qualified, trained, mentored, and monitored. The system is derived from current literature in adult education, best practices in distance education, and a conscientious peer review following a pilot implementation.

Online Instructor Evaluation System

In 2004, the **Online Instructor Evaluation System (OIES)** was developed by the College for Distance Learning at Park, to enable and ensure the finest education experience for online students via a systematic approach to faculty training, support, mentoring, and evaluation. The OIES provides an opportunity for instructors to reflect upon their teaching practice, evaluate their performance honestly, and improve as necessary for ensuring a quality learning experience for our students.

The OIES was developed as a dual **mentoring/evaluation** process for online instructors. Unlike traditional "brief glimpse" models of instructor evaluation, this complex system spans an entire term, emphasizing professional growth over eight weeks. The Online Instructor Evaluators ("Evaluators") are full-time faculty at Park University and they teach online as well. Evaluators carry a case load of 10-15 instructors per eight-week term. They work closely with them to encourage online teaching excellence. As the course begins, work with an Evaluator is formative in nature (and confidential). The process culminates in a Summative Evaluation that is sent to the College for Distance Learning and the instructor's academic department.

The evaluation results are used in the Instructor Scheduling System and other personnel decisions. The OIES reports also are used to prepare for accreditation visits, improve instructor performance, address needs for ongoing professional development, encourage the scholarship of teaching, and enhance student satisfaction. The use of this system conveys the message that the university is committed to high expectations and continuous quality monitoring.

Who is Evaluated and When

Upon successful completion of a six-week online training course that encompasses the learning management system (platform), institutional policies, and research-based "best

practices" for online teaching/learning, the new instructor is assigned an online faculty mentor and a course to teach the following term. For the instructor's second term of online teaching, the instructor is assigned to a terminally degreed faculty/Online Instructor Evaluator, who conducts a series of pre-term, in-term, and post-term evaluations designed to highlight and strengthen course facilitation skills. Instructors make adjustments to their teaching efforts if warranted, and write a series of reflective self-reviews, also online. Instructors communicate by email and telephone with the Online Instructor Evaluator as needed. In this way the OIES enables the College for Distance Learning to gauge the quality of instructor performance.

The series of reviews incorporates checklists and reminders to help instructors stay on track, not only with the pragmatics of teaching online and university policy compliance, but also with respect to andragogy. Most Park students are working adults. Using the OIES reviews as a template, Online Instructor Evaluators observe each online course on a regular basis to provide timely feedback during the term. University-specific policies, best practices, and course facilitation requirements are discussed. The emphasis at all times focuses on the instructor's course facilitation skills rather than subject matter mastery or the content or structure of the course. The OIES is meant to enhance teaching. Curricular content is the responsibility of the academic department.

Summative evaluation occurs upon completion of the term; this final review is forwarded to the academic department head along with the instructor self-review and student evaluations. Following an instructor's initial term of online teaching, the OIES mentoring and evaluation occur annually. The Online Instructor Evaluation System is encapsulated below:

- **Formative Instructor Appraisals - Focus**
  - **Preterm Review**
    - Compliance with Park University/College for Distance Learning Policies
    - Preparation for Course Start Date
  - **Formative Review 1**
    - Community Building
    - Discussion Thread Interaction
    - Course Organization
    - Supplemental Materials
  - **Formative Review 2**
    - Discussion Facilitation
    - Course Climate
    - Discussion Grading
  - **Formative Review 3**
    - Implementation of Assessments
    - Feedback and Grading
    - Course Organization
    - Final Exam Preparation
- **Summative Instructor Appraisal - Focus**
  - Course Organization
  - Building Community
  - Discussion Facilitation
  - Assessment, Grading and Feedback
  - Course Climate
  - Professional Engagement
- **Instructor Reflective Self-Appraisal**
  - Recognition of strengths as an instructor and areas for development
- **Evaluator Recommendations**
  - Retain Instructor

- o   Retain with Contingencies (reduced assignment next term; follow closely)
- o   Probation (repeat evaluation process next term)
- o   Do Not Retain (used for major infractions of policy without improvement)

Academic departments use these artifacts from the College for Distance Learning as a basis for retention and promotion decisions. The evaluation system offers a practical portfolio artifact to showcase teaching strengths and course facilitation talents of online instructors. Additionally, the formative and summative tools foster instructor reflection on best practices for online teaching. Finally, evaluation data can be linked to institutional assessment to meet regional accreditation requirements.

Demonstrated Benefits

The Online Instructor Evaluation System was developed out of concern for the online learning experience and academic success of our students. The system, which is operated through a web-based portal, emphasizes the instructor as a reflective and involved participant in the evaluation process. The OIES tool and process are revised annually during campus convocation time. The benefits and impact have been demonstrated repeatedly through:

- • Improved instructor performance through prompt intervention
- • Strengthened scholarship of teaching
- • Clarification of learning needs of faculty
- • Retention, satisfaction and enhanced caliber of quality online instructors
- • Greater familiarity of part-time instructors with institutional practices, culture
- • Enhanced student satisfaction
- • More robust preparation for accreditation visit
- • Informed personnel decisions.

Drawbacks of the Online Instructor Evaluation System

Although the OIES yields a tremendous amount of information on teaching performance and has improved the quality of online teaching, its disadvantages for a growing program became apparent in 2007. The frequent observations and interactions with instructors, commencing prior to term and ending post-term, meant that the Evaluators had no time when they were not occupied with this work. Also, as our online enrollments grew and Park University was identified as the institution with the second-largest online enrollment in the United States, we no longer were able to keep up with the need for robust OIES observations given the number of Evaluators (7) on the team.

A Scaled-down Version

A simple but informative version of the Online Instructor Evaluation System might be more appropriate in instances where the resources are not available for time-consuming observations. If frequent monitoring of all online courses is desirable, an institution might implement a brief form of the system, using critical elements. Thus the **Quick Check** was developed by the Coordinator of Online Faculty Evaluation, in response to concerns over sub-standard performance by some online instructors who were scheduled to teach the subsequent term. For example, instructors might be "absent" from the discussions most of the week, or they might post grades late and with little feedback on how students could improve. Sometimes this information is revealed through a student complaint. In such cases additional information is needed to inform personnel decisions. The Coordinator performs the Quick Check process, which was piloted during the Fall 2 term in 2007. In essence, the

Quick Check enables immediate objective personnel judgments, as it addresses two critical policy requirements:

Criterion #1: Instructor posts in all weekly discussion threads no fewer than 4 days during the week.

Criterion #2: Instructor provides timely grading AND provides gradebook feedback comments on student assignments and graded discussions.

Instructors who are found to be deficient in meeting one or both requirements are contacted directly by the Coordinator during their term of teaching. The Coordinator informs the instructor that policy is not being met and that the instructor must make improvements immediately. Two weeks later, another Quick Check is conducted using the same criteria. If the instructor again is found to be deficient, they are not scheduled to teach the following term. During that next term, the College for Distance Learning and the academic unit seek remedial opportunities for the instructor or dismissal, as deemed appropriate.

The Quick Check is efficient, yet analyzes only two aspects of instructor performance. Due to the vastness and variance among online instructional models across programs of study, the Quick Check was judged to be too narrow in focus. Consequently, the Online Instructor Evaluation team in 2008 decided to find a compromise between the robust, thorough Online Instructor Evaluation System and the succinct, direct Quick Check.

Faculty Online Observation

In the Fall 1 term of 2008, Park University piloted the Faculty Online Observation (FOO). It is designed to (1) ensure a quality educational experience for students; (2) provide practical support for instructors; and (3) gauge the strengths of our online instruction. This observation reflects the instructor's effectiveness at facilitating the course, particularly through interaction with the students. Like the Online Instructor Evaluation System, the process is supported by established research in best practices in online learning. The observation proceeds as follows:

- Instructors are teamed with an Online Instructor Observer, who observes the faculty in the online classroom during a two week period. The observation focuses on instructor facilitation of student learning.
- Using an online reporting system, the Online Instructor Observer issues a recommendation at the end of the observation period.
- The completed Online Instructor Observation is sent to the instructor for their review and comments (using email notification and a designated website).
- After the instructor has commented on the review (optional) and electronically signed the observation (required), the Online Instructor Observation is archived in the College for Distance Learning.

The observer chooses one of three possible recommendations for the instructor: "Needs Improvement", "Meets Expectations", or "Exemplary". Once the observation is completed, the instructor is notified and utilizes a secure online portal to access the observation. The instructor is asked to provide a response and to sign the observation. The comment and signature provide an opportunity for the instructor to acknowledge their review and to address any areas of confusion or concern. The observer again accesses the observation before sending the document to an online archive. The archived observation then is made available to the academic department head for consideration regarding future teaching contracts, and to administrative decision makers as necessary. Using the Faculty Online Observation, Park University can prioritize the hiring of instructors with respect to their skill and proficiency.

Additional Supports for Instructors

Park University's College for Distance Learning has a single online resource location for all online policies and forms. This repository contains myriad professional development documents and several discussion forums. All online instructors are strongly encouraged to utilize the resource center throughout their academic relationship with Park University. The Online Instructor Evaluators participate in the online resource center to answer questions, post professional development information, and keep the information current.

Future Directions

In keeping with sound educational practices and the need for continuous quality assurance, the Online Instructor Evaluator team seeks to identify trends and to "evaluate the evaluation." For example, can we identify quality distinctions among instructors in certain programs of study? What additional enhancements might be made to our observation processes? What is the optimal case load for Evaluators? Are the Evaluators applying the observation tool uniformly, or can differences be found?

Since 2006 the Online Instructor Evaluation conducts weekly conference calls for updates. Since then we have discussed what works and what does not work. We meet once a year on campus to conduct business that includes revisions to our tools and procedures. The Evaluation team has begun to design a study of inter-rater reliability. We recognize the need for uniformity of application of all procedures in order to attain the best results. This research will begin in Summer 2009.

Conclusion

Many universities and colleges are initiating or expanding online educational programming in an attempt to meet the needs of today's learners in an increasingly complex world. For many students, online learning is the only avenue available, as other obligations interfere with the ability to attend classes on a campus. For others, no campus is within easy reach. Regardless, those students who do pursue continued education through this mode are deserving of the best we can offer in the way of quality instruction. We acknowledge the tremendous benefits that can accrue through collaboration with colleagues at other institutions. It is our desire to add to the body of knowledge on best practices for online learning, and to engage productively in dialogue with our international colleagues of similar persuasion.