GRADUATE FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE TEACHING

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The participants for this study were 47 doctoral faculty from Nova Southeastern University Fischler School of Education and Human Services (FSEHS). The faculty taught six-credit, three-credit, and two-credit online courses to 701 students in the winter 2004 term using the WebCT platform. The data were collected using an 11-question survey that focused on faculty's use of technology; time spent in online instructional activities; perceptions of faculty role; and assessment of student work. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were used to interpret the data. The investigators intended to use the results for several purposes. The first purpose was to collect data on the use of WebCT tools and determine the level or faculty expertise in online teaching. The second purpose was to add to the growing body of research about online teaching and learning that currently contains very little information about graduate faculty experiences. The third purpose of the study was to provide data that corroborates the notion that online teaching needs to be defined and rewarded in new ways. Research indicates that more and more higher education institutions, particularly private universities, are expanding their online course offerings at meteoric rates (Allen & Seaman, 2003; Berg, 2002; Huber & Lowry, 2003). This trend, however, has not resulted in the appropriate changes with regard to traditional teaching and learning paradigms (Bender, 2003; Goodyear, 2002; Stephenson, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2001; Yoon, 2003). The online instructional trend is also resulting in the ability to deliver courses and programs to greater numbers of students at much lower costs to institutions (Berg, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). These institutional benefits are not being passed on to faculty whose teaching loads and financial rewards are still being viewed using traditional standards and criteria (Berg, 2002; DiBiase, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

INTRODUCTION

Nova Southeastern University (NSU) has a long history of field-based and distance education. Providing education through innovative delivery systems has always been an important part of the university's mission. The NSU distance education programs had their early beginnings in audio-conferencing and various blended models that combined audio and video conferencing with computer assisted instruction.

Complete online degree programs are now offered by 34% of institutions of higher educa-

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The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 6(2), 2005, pp. 155–160 ISSN 1528-3518

tion in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2003). In light of these statistics and the desire to stay competitive with similar institutions, NSU has embraced online education as its present and future. To meet the demand for online courses and online degree programs, the university has, over the last 5 years, shifted to the exclusive use of WebCT as its instructional platform for online courses.

NSU's Fischler School of Education and Human Services (FSEHS) has been and continues to be a pioneer of distance- and technology-based education. The school's 12,000 students are enrolled in four masters and six doctoral programs. Most FSEHS faculty began their careers teaching in traditional face-to-face classroom environments but now teach in one or more of three learning environments: fully face to face, blended (partly face to face, partly online), and fully online (Nova Southeastern University, 2002).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This study grew out of questions the investigators had regarding faculty time spent preparing for and teaching online courses in WebCT in three FGSEHS doctoral programs: Doctor of Higher Education Leadership (DHEL), Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership (DOL), and Doctor of Educational Leadership (DEDL). In formal and informal discussions and meetings, faculty indicated that they spent much more time carrying out the responsibilities of online teaching than face-to-face teaching. This prompted one of the investigators to document the hours spent teaching two online doctoral classes during the 2003 fall term. These were two six-credit courses with 17 and 7 students, respectively, taught over a 15-week semester.

The results showed that a total of 160 hours were spent online teaching a class of 17 students during a 15-week term. Also, a total of 80 hours was spent teaching a class of 7 students. These hours included weekly time spent grading assignments, reviewing student responses to weekly lectures, conducting chats, responding to individual student's concerns, and grading student assignments. The results of this ministudy were presented at a faculty meeting where there was unanimous agreement that it requires much more time to teach an online course than a face-to-face course. This observation is well supported in literature (Bender, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2001; Simonson, 2000). Yet, there continues to be little recognition on the part of university administrators regarding the impact of this on faculty load and compensation. This information then served as an impetus to the investigators to document more widely various characteristics of online teaching and learning. Consequently, a survey was developed and distributed to doctoral faculty teaching online courses in the DHEL, DOL, and DEDL programs in the winter 2004 term.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

This study sought to document faculty perceptions and experiences in several different areas: overall use of WebCT technology and tools, faculty training, time spent teaching online, course interaction, perception of instructor role, and assessment of student work. These areas of inquiry grew out of discussions with faculty who teach online. It became clear to the investigators that there was wide variation in the amount of time spent teaching online, the use of and the extent of use of WebCT tools, perception of faculty role and involvement in the learning process, and methods of assessing the quality and authenticity of student work. These areas of inquiry formed the basis of the questions asked on the survey instrument.

Participants

The participants in this study were full-time and adjunct faculty teaching online doctoral courses at FSEHS in the winter 2004 term. Of the 47 respondents, 16 taught two-credit

courses, four taught three-credit courses, and 27 taught six-credit courses. All faculty were experienced in teaching both face-to-face and online courses. The faculty who took part in the survey taught a total of 701 doctoral students.

Procedures

The investigators chose to use a survey instrument as a means of collecting data from faculty. This decision was based on three main factors: the nature of the information to be collected, support for this type of method from the literature for eliciting information from faculty, and the investigators' experience and background in online teaching.

Initially, the survey was sent electronically to 63 doctoral faculty in December, 2003. The investigators chose to collect data electronically because that was the most time-efficient way to reach faculty who are located around the country. Due to a fairly poor response rate, it was again sent in February, and then in March. It was from the combined efforts of these three requests that 51 responses were ultimately obtained. Of the 51, four were discarded due to the unclear nature of the responses. A total of 47 surveys were then used in the analysis of this study. Before the survey was distributed to faculty, it was validated by a small team of doctoral faculty at FSEHS. The surveys were returned anonymously as e-mail attachments; they were collected by a third party so that identifying e-mails could be removed before the surveys were given to the investigators.

The survey was comprised of both quantitative and qualitative questions because some data can be easily quantified while some of the questions were broader in scope and required extensive explanation from faculty. The survey instrument consisted of demographic questions and questions that addressed the areas of inquiry of the study. The demographic questions concerned the program in which the course was taught, the number of credit hours, the length of term, and the number of students in the course. (The variation in course credits and class size will be used in subsequent studies based on additional survey questions.) The questions that required narrative responses regarding the nature of online teaching grew out of group discussions with faculty, formal faculty meetings, and the investigators' personal experience with online teaching.

The surveys were grouped according to the number of credit hours of each course. There are three distinct groups of courses: six-credit courses, three-credit courses, and two-credit courses. A variety of methods were used to compile and analyze the data within these three groups. All of the data were tabulated manually by the investigators. A content analysis was performed on the narrative responses to several questions, and appropriate categories were created from the raw data by the investigators for easier analysis.

For questions that addressed use of specific communication tools, faculty training, time spent communicating with students, faculty perception of role, and faculty time spent on course preparation and delivery, the data were computed using modal distributions, since frequency was important.

Qualitative questions, where narrative responses were reviewed by the investigators, focused on assessment and authenticity of student work, value of student-student interaction, obstacles to effective communication, and effective group interaction in the discussion area.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before results of the study are presented, it is important to point out several limitations. First, while data were collected on class size, these data were not correlated with the time spent in instructional delivery. However, it must be understood that the number of students in any class has a direct impact on the amount of time faculty spend on instructional activities. Second, the number of credit hours and the length of the semester/term also have

an impact on the amount of time faculty devote to teaching a course. A six-credit course has greater demand, for example, in terms of the structure and course requirements than a two-credit course. Finally, the content and focus of the course are also related to time spent on instructional activities. Research courses, for example, may be structured to demand greater time from both faculty and students. However, the faculty and the investigators agree that, independent of all of the aforementioned variables, time demands are much greater in online classes than in face-to-face classes.

Two of the questions on the survey focused on the use of WebCT tools. It is noteworthy that faculty are using most of the tools offered by WebCT (discussion area, chat rooms, e-mail, assignment dropbox) to assist with communication and course delivery. Eighty-nine percent of faculty are using the discussion area, 65% are using WebCT mail, and 78% are using chats. The test generator and whiteboard are used least, but there may be a clear explanation for this, since these tools are not typically a part of the general training offered to faculty by the university. In addition, most doctoral courses do not use examinations to assess student learning. Since the courses are delivered mostly in an asynchronous format, lectures and discussion questions are posted in the discussion area, and are not a part of the chats. One final note about this concerns the high frequency of use of NSU e-mail (68%). There could be several explanations for this, but that will require follow-up with the respondents.

Respondents were also asked to rank order, in terms of use, the various communications tools in WebCT. Since most of the doctoral courses are either completely or mostly asynchronous, it is not surprising to see the most frequently used tools are the discussion area and WebCT mail. Chats are used much less frequently, although small group chats to support team projects and other assignments and limited whole group chats are components of some courses.

Two questions addressed the training faculty have received. Seventy percent of the respondents have received training in WebCT, 53% have received training in online teaching methods, and 25% have received training in online course design. Most of the faculty teaching online (66%) received their training from NSU.

Perhaps the most important question on the instrument addressed the amount of time faculty spends on a variety of instructional activities related to online teaching. Most time is spent on communication with students, which includes posting and answering messages in the discussion area and reading and responding to mail in WebCT. A great deal of time is also spent on both course preparation and evaluation of student work. For six-credit courses, the faculty spends between 2 to 11 hours weekly on the aforementioned activities. For three- and two-credit courses, weekly time spent was between 2 and 5 hours.

Faculty were asked to identify major obstacles to effective communication in online courses. The results show that 65% of faculty consider students' lack of technology skills to be a major obstacle to effective online communication. The second major finding is that 23% of faculty consider timeliness of student responses to be a problem. However, 15% of faculty indicated they had encountered no barriers to effective communication with students.

Faculty were asked to describe how they use the discussion area in WebCT effectively. Because this is considered to be the equivalent of the *classroom* and the center of instructional activity, student-to-student interaction was deemed the most valuable feature by 51% of the respondents. The second most important use of the discussion area (34%) was to provide feedback to students. Only 10% of faculty did not use the discussion area and these responses came from faculty who use e-mail as a primary tool for discussion. These results indicate that the faculty who use the discussion area are using it for the purpose for which it was intended.

The discussion area was also the topic of an additional question. The results indicate that 51% of faculty considers the discussion area to be instrumental in building learning communities and 34% indicate that it promotes good communication skills on the part of the students. These results support the premise that all online learning has as its goal the building of learning communities (Hiltz, 1998).

With regard to faculty perceptions of their role, 29% of the faculty in the six-credit courses and 100% of the faculty in three-credit courses see themselves primarily as facilitators. Thirty-seven percent of the faculty in two-credit courses, which are largely research courses, perceive themselves as conveyors of information first, planners (25%) and facilitators (25%) second. The investigators suspect this may be a function of the type of courses they teach. Research courses are more directive in nature and require more formal instruction and "conveying" of information.

In determining the authenticity of student work, the most common response of faculty (32%) was the reliance on professional judgment and experience. Evaluating the consistent quality of student work was the second most important method of assessment (29%), while use of Internet software (21%) was third. The investigators believe that further work needs to be done in this area, especially since 23% of faculty either do not concern themselves with this issue, do not check or authenticate, or did not provide a response.

CONCLUSIONS

While online education is still a very young field, there is a rapidly expanding body of literature and research on what is commonly referred to as *e-learning* which centers primarily on the experiences of online learners. Much less is known of the experiences and perceptions of faculty teaching online courses, particularly graduate faculty.

A key point with regard to graduate faculty training is that it is a two-pronged approach, involving technical and andragogical skills. Effective online teaching is not only concerned with well-developed technical skills. As Palloff and Pratt (1999) have noted,

> Electronic pedagogy is not just about fancy software packages or simple course conversion. It is about developing the skills involved with community building among a group of learners so as to maximize the benefits and potential that this medium holds in the educational area. (p. 159)

This study indicated that the majority of FSEHS faculty have benefited from both types of training.

The majority of faculty time in online courses is spent communicating with students, building and sustaining learning communities. As noted by Rosenberg (2001): "What is emerging most clearly from the technological explosion is, ironically enough, a refocusing on people" (p. 120).

Questions raised through this study that warrant further investigation center on the issue of assessment of student learning in online courses and authenticity of student work. These are far more complex matters in which there are no easily agreed on standards or procedures. It is clear the instrument used to gather the data presented here needs to be expanded and modified to allow the investigators to explore these more complicated topics. In addition, the population needs to be expanded to include a larger and more diverse set of faculty.

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