INSTITUTIONAL ACTIONS VS. FACTORS INFLUENCING DISTANCE LEARNING FACULTY: A DELPHI APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The number of online adjunct faculty members has increased significantly and are currently the fastest growing segment of college instructors. This is due, in part, to the changes in university strategies to implement online learning. In fact, 66% of higher education institutions indicated that online or distance learning is critical to their long term plans. Much of this growth in online adjunct strategy may be attributed to the lower cost structure and adaptability to changing enrollments. As more institutions of higher learning hire online adjunct faculty members, the need for engagement may become problematic. Specifically, online adjunct faculty encounter a myriad of problems associated with the mere fact that they are not in the physical presence of the institutions they serve. Faculty engagement is paramount on a number of levels including the potential correlation of faculty engagement to student outcomes. The authors will employ a Delphi approach reviewing peer reviewed literature to show the importance of engagement as well as the associated challenges of universities to effectively engage online adjunct faculty.

KEYWORDS: Distance learning, Faculty engagement influencers, Motivational factors, Online adjunct faculty, University leadership challenges

THE DNA OF ONLINE ADJUNCT FACULTY

Looking at the gender of online adjunct faculty revealed 62.6% were female while 37.4% were male (Yazici, Altun, 2013). The mean age for online adjunct faculty members is 46.3 years (Rosen, 2010). Educational background indicates 64.2% of faculty hold a master’s degree as their highest degree while 32.5% earned a doctoral degree. Additionally, 23.6% of master’s degree faculty were pursuing additional degrees; 74.5% of those pursuing an additional degree were working on a doctoral degree while 13.8% were working towards a second master’s degree. The remaining 11.7% were working on either a specialty degree or professional degree. The average online adjunct faculty member reported 6.83 years of experience with 4.08 years teaching in an online environment. A total of 48% of faculty reported they teach concurrently for two or more universities (Bedford, 2009, Babb, Mirabella, 2007).
PROFESSIONAL AND CAREER CHOICES

A total of 55.2% of faculty indicated they were satisfied with their status of teaching as an online adjunct faculty member. Interestingly enough, 42.6% reported that they were also seeking a full-time faculty position in the very same institution(s) where they were adjuncts. An additional 12.9% of online adjunct faculty were not necessarily seeking adjunct positions at other schools but were more focused on seeking additional assignments at the institution(s) where they already teach (Mandernach, Register, O’Donnell, 2016).

PERCEPTIONS AND LACK OF AFFILIATION

Online adjunct faculty often feel disconnected from the issues and the organizational culture which appear to impede efforts in training, coaching, and development (Dolan, 2011). To exacerbate feelings of alienation, adjuncts have been accused of degrading the academic quality and integrity of the institution and are inferior to full-time faculty (Gordon, 2003). Additionally, they have been referred to as academic gypsies, highway flyers, or “roads scholars” (Ludlow, 1998). These perceptions, biased observations, and feelings of being disconnected from the university’s culture likely impede efforts towards training, development, and coaching (Dolan, 2011).

INSTITUTIONAL DEMANDS FOR DISTANCE LEARNING FACULTY SERVICES

Twenty first century distance learning institutions face critical challenges insuring student success and post graduate integration in a global business environment. Specific to these challenges is the need to integrate instructor presence into distance learning classroom curricula without displacing instructional elements and strategies working together to create optimal online learning experiences. Institutional expectations of faculty attributes include allowing appropriate responses in real time to new challenges and questions posed by aspects of globalization, and making it possible for students to enroll in courses all over the world without needing to relocate (Hawawini, 2005).

Institutional expectations of student learning outcomes are directed toward interfacing between physical classroom and distance learning instruction, while providing the ability for adjunct faculty to engage in class activities, enabling access to content beyond the timeframe of the course, and provide opportunity for all students to contribute. Institutional administrators may face reality with an acknowledgement of multiple ways for students to acquire knowledge and information.
Distance learning faculty engagement includes sensitivity to student diversity, global awareness, technologically competency, and opportunities for direct student engagement with real-world activities. Distance learning faculty experiences include being a teacher, a published researcher, and maintaining instructional presence in the classroom. Social and facilitating roles are emphasized in distance learning environments because of the lack of physical interaction and presence. Instructor presence is defined as:

The specific actions and behaviors taken by the instructor that projects him/herself as a real person... and is more likely to be manifested in the ‘live’ part of courses--as they are being implemented--as opposed to during the course design process(Richardson et al., 2016, p. 84).

An engagement gap exists in distance learning requiring administrators to acknowledge distance learning is evolving into an era where all faculty must have a specific level of technology competency. Administrators must create conditions for professional development and introduce cutting edge policies to accompany the changes introduced by a sophisticated distance learning model (Stewart, Gregg, 2015).

Institutional reliance on adjunct distance learning faculty requires administrators understand characteristics of their distance learning faculty population and customize training, support, and development initiatives to meet their unique needs. Administrators must provide comprehensive adjunct faculty training on asynchronous interaction strategies fostering teaching inclusive of social and emotional presence in the online classroom. If institutional leaders structure adjunct faculty training and development to go beyond exclusive emphasis on distance learning teaching strategies to include specific background in pedagogy, andragogy, and learning theory, they may maximize the expertise of adjunct faculty who are simultaneously engaged as both students and teachers as they provide valuable insight to help institutions adapt their faculty training and development to be more responsive to the needs of adult learners (Mandernach, Register, O’Donnell, 2015).

Employee engagement is a broad concept involving a number of factors influencing organizational performance (Dash, 2013). Kahn (1990), a pioneer in exploring employee engagement, described engagement as the connection employees hold for their work-related roles whereby they become immersed emotionally, physically, and intellectually in performing their job function. Emotional and intellectual commitment toward the mission, vision, and work of the organization are a function of employee engagement (Sagayarani, 2015). Employee engagement refers to employees’ measureable level of attachment toward their job, workplace colleagues, and the organization, elements exerting significant influence over the inclination to learn and apply discretionary effort toward work related goals (Sagayarani, 2015). Employee engagement reflects the level of commitment and involvement employees hold for their organization and its related values (Dash, 2013). Engagement is represented by emotionally-linked choices on the
Faculty engagement is: Perpetual focused attention, enjoyment, and enthusiasm for the activities associated with faculty work through which the individual finds purpose, senses congruence with personal values and talents, is challenged to use knowledge and skills, and experiences productivity even during difficult times (Livingston, 2011, p. 11).

**Benefits of Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement provides a series of benefits. Engaged employees are more productive than their disengaged colleagues (Seijts, Crim, 2006). Engaged employees combined level of physical and psychological presence enhances focus, attentiveness, and job integration (He, Zhu, Zheng, 2014). Intrinsic motivation manifests in engaged employees as they apply personal resources to their job while accepting opportunity costs and personal sacrifice (Rich, Lepine, Crawford, 2010). Engaged employees possess a different mindset from their disengaged counterparts.

Engaged employees perceive they can make a positive impact on their organizations, increasing the likelihood they will lead, join, or otherwise support improvement initiatives. Engaged employees are more than twice as likely as disengaged employees to believe they can positively influence quality of the organization’s product or services. Engaged employees are three times more likely than disengaged employees to believe they can positively influence customer service and cost (Seijts, Crim, 2006). Organizations able to engage employees outperform competition unable or unwilling to engage employees. Engaged employee are a business imperative during times of unpredictability and business turbulence (Shuck, Reio, 2011), making understanding engagement antecedents essential (Chaudhary, 2014).

Effectively engaging online faculty can enhance student performance (Barman, Roy, 2011). Engaged faculty employ higher levels of academic freedom prompting innovative and creative methods resulting in enhanced student learning outcomes (Zawaduk et al., 2014). Faculty engagement fosters a student centric learning environment promoting self-regulated learning (Cassidy, 2011). Enhanced student learning outcomes evolve from self-regulated learning as students employ available resources, prior outcomes, and learning styles as they develop effective learning strategies (MacNeil, Hand, 2014). Engaged faculty bring revolutionary transformation to an academic setting (Raina, Khatri, 2015).

**Faculty Engagement Influencers**

Seijts and Crim (2006) identified 10 Cs of employee engagement: (a) connect, (b) clarity, (c) convey, (d) congratulate, (e) contribute, (f) control (g) collaborate, (h) credibility, (i) confidence, and (j) career. Organizational leaders connect with faculty by demonstrating how faculty are valued. Online faculties’ physical separation from the institution creates challenges in
demonstrating their value. Opportunities for growth or career advancement, although limited for online faculty, contribute to engagement. Involving online faculty in curriculum development can create growth opportunities leading to increased engagement. Clarity refers to communicating to faculty a clear vision of the institution’s goals, why they are important, and how they should be achieved. Convey relates to institutional leaders sharing expectations and feedback with faculty. Formalizing a performance management system for online faculty is challenging, but can serve as the vehicle for conveying expectations and feedback. Congratulate closely relates to conveying expectations and providing feedback as leaders praise improvement and exemplary performance in a timely and routine manner (Seijts, Crim, 2006).

Contribute refers to faculties’ perception and sense their input and efforts matter and contribute to the achievement of organizational goals involving student success. Control involves faculties’ ability to influence factors regarding the flow and pace of their academic roles. Involving online faculty in decisions affecting their role or in goal setting communicates a sense of control. Collaboration enhances engagement as faculty work with others on initiatives deemed important to themselves and the institution. Physical distance and diverse schedules create challenges establishing collaboration among online faculty. Credibility refers to the institution’s reputation and ethical standards, as faculty want to take pride in institutions they serve and represent. Without a physical presence, and many online faculty working for multiple institutions, identifying with an institution to establish credibility is a challenge. Confidence refers to belief in the institution as being exemplars of superior performance. Institutional leaders need to connect with online faculty to establish standards and routinely share performance outcomes to build confidence (Seijts, Crim, 2006).

Concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation readily serve as a foundation for understanding and influencing engagement with distance learning faculty. Given variable relationships with affiliated institutions (ranging from occasional contracts to a semi-permanent arrangements), distance learning faculty may be challenged by a lack of predictable academic opportunities. Challenges consist of communication issues based on lack of or inconsistent messages, role ambiguity related to processes, procedures for different teaching modalities as well as roles within the academic and student community. Are online adjunct faculty treated as participative members of the larger academic community in the affiliated institution? The institutional context becomes a relevant aspect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.

Basic organizational affiliation sets the stage for applying intrinsic and extrinsic motivation theory in examining issues of institutional loyalty as well as performance levels of distance learning faculty. Kinicki, Fugate (2016) stated “motivation is the fuel that drives results and performance” (p.147). Parker (2011) found “faculty generally teach in distance education programs for the same reasons (incentives) that they teach traditional courses; for intrinsic rewards” (p.5). Intrinsic motivation creates excitement about doing work because of self-satisfaction and sense
of self-esteem. Kinicki, Fugate (2016) asserted, “We create our own intrinsic motivation by giving ourselves intrinsic rewards such as positive emotions, satisfaction and self-praise” (p.147). Distance learning faculty may face additional challenges in building intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation derives from received or perceived tangible rewards, including recognition, money, teaching contracts, preferred schedules and pay increases (Kinicki, Fugate, 2016).

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES AND PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE/ADJUNCT FACULTY

Dolan’s (2011) study of online adjunct faculty perceptions included a substantial list of factors influencing perceptions: (a) limited and ineffective communication independent of the channel, (b) instructors’ lack of acknowledged value to the institution: (c) limited self-development opportunities, (d) lower compensation than full-time faculty, (e) sense of disconnection from affiliate institution, (f) feeling undervalued and not recognized by the affiliate institution as a source of knowledge and influence when working with students, and (g) contact from management was usually geared toward correcting faculty member’s behavior rather than to acknowledge positive contributions to the students and the university.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES FACING DYNAMICALLY CHANGING ACADEMIC DELIVERY MODALITIES

Beaudoin as cited in Burnette (2015) defined leadership in distance learning education as attitudes and behaviors generating an environment prompting innovative change, creating a shared vision among individuals and their organizations leading to alignment in direction, and spawning management and implementation of ideas. Beaudoin (2015) recommended leaders in online distance education should, “insinuate themselves into the academic mainstream and the inner circle of decision makers responsible for bringing the entire organization to a new place” (p.15). Academic institutions have been challenged by a paradigm shift as distance education modality begins meeting the needs of a digitally versatile population and the economic challenges of providing needed educational opportunities. External pressures facing higher education include: (a) economic impact of potential reduction in governmental funding, (b) faculty resistance to changing instructional modality, (c) questionable validity of online learning, and (d) political challenges including worldwide competition, and shifting public consensus about tax priorities.

Leadership challenges include:

a. Organizational transformation with distributive innovation challenging status quo at all levels of the organization. Examples of status quo challenges include instructional modalities, delivery platforms, changing student needs, faculty roles, expectations, contractual variations, and traditional perception.

b. Academic institutional policies and procedures with inadequate attention to
impact of technology as part of the student centered process. Online education is dependent upon technological services and platforms for functionality.

c. Policies and procedures addressing shifting roles, expectations and technology challenges for faculty and students. How online modality changes dynamics in the classroom based on reliance of one-dimensional interaction rather than traditional face-to-face.

d. Policy regarding acquiring, maintaining technology equipment as well as providing security.

Burnette (2015) conducted a qualitative study of online administrators to determine political challenges and strategies to deal with these challenges within the context of higher educational institutions. Respondents defined strategies for dealing with political challenges: “build relationships, build trust, find common ground, empower faculty and use data to drive change” (Burnette, 2015, p. 18). In order for online administrators to empower and advocate for online faculty, they need assurance of their role and position within the organizational hierarchy. Given some educational institutions are dealing with the paradigm change of online education, academic leaders and administrators should serve as technology advisors, and faculty and student advocates.

**CONCLUSION**

Many of today's distance faculty members don’t feel valued or satisfied in their role. Their level of satisfaction and retention are enhanced when they are engaged as active collaborators in the institutions where they teach. The literature has shown that engaged faculty are more committed, enthusiastic, and involved. Engaged faculty may enthusiastically utilize creative and innovative approaches to learning within the context of their teaching style. As an ancillary outcome, it has been demonstrated that the level of faculty engagement influences student learning outcomes.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Administrators should create a culture where adjunct distance faculty are more involved and integrated to enhance their level of engagement. They should also provide developmental opportunities to further enhance faculty engagement as well as better serve the needs of the university. Administrators should also practice the “10 C’s” of faculty engagement to include the merits of connection, clarity of expectations, conveyance of communications, congratulations (recognition), control (influence), collaboration (collegiality), credibility (institutional integrity), and confidence (sustainability).
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