AN APPROACH TO ENGAGING ONLINE FACULTY IN SUPPORT OF STUDENT SUCCESS

ELENA MASTORS, TAMMY WOODY, UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX, ARIZONA, USA

ABSTRACT

Multiple proactive initiatives were deployed specific to increasing faculty engagement for online facilitators in the College of Humanities and Sciences. Previously, efforts to engage online faculty had been primarily corrective in nature as a response to classroom reviews or student complaints. A robust strategic plan tailored to faculty needs, coupled with attention to solicited feedback from faculty, resulted in a more positive, supportive, and dynamic culture and climate of faculty interaction and engagement. The plan aligns with the adoption of Boyer's domains of scholarship as discovery, integration, application, and/or teaching are demonstrated by the faculty being recognized. Descriptions of best practices and lessons learned are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Academic discussions, Recognition program, Scholarship, Teaching excellence

IMPELTUS FOR FACULTY RECOGNITION PROGRAM

University of Phoenix faculty are often practitioners in the field. This is a desirable trait as they can share real world professional experiences with the adult learners they teach. One result of the practitioner model is an emphasis on teaching and service over activities more closely resembling academic research and scholarship. While faculty tend to be highly engaged with students in their learning environments, they are less apt to engage with one another and less likely to contribute to their respective disciplines via traditional research and scholarship.

We wanted to provide faculty with pathways and resources that would help them develop a sense of community with fellow instructors. Via continued focus on Boyer’s perspective on scholarship as explained in his 1990 volume, Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate, a deeper and richer community of practice is emerging due to deliberate and intentional planning.

Because of the large number of associate online faculty, much of the interaction with associate (part time) faculty in particular is focused on corrective action with regard to engagement of students, or disputes with students in the classroom over a number of issues such as grades, other interactions and so forth. We decided to adopt a more proactive approach to engaging our large number of faculty. Thus, we conceived of in early 2016, and launched in spring 2016, the Faculty Recognition Program. There are three main components to the recognition program; ongoing recognition, quarterly recognition, and annual recognition [as described as follows]. Since that time, several hundred faculty were proactively recognized for their achievements. [Annex A]
Ongoing Recognition is a proactive way to recognition faculty for going above and beyond standard requirements for the College. Faculty are selected because of exemplary performance from a variety of data points, and are given e-cards and personalized emails. These data points include classroom reviews, data on faculty in the classroom, student end of course surveys, and engagement with students in our online communities. Our Quarterly Recognition focuses on celebrating our faculty on a quarterly basis. We publicize 5, 10, 15, and 20 year anniversaries our faculty quarterly newsletter We Rise, and on our dedicated Word Press site. Further, faculty achievements such as teaching excellence, scholarship, community involvement are captured through a survey to all faculty and highlighted in the newsletter, and on our Word Press site. Finally, our Annual Recognition program focused on annual awards in the three following categories:

**Outstanding Teaching Excellence**

**CRITERIA:** Faculty member must be in good standing. This recognition is based on a demonstration of positive influence on students as documented by student feedback, commitment to exceptional quality of instruction as documented in classroom evaluations, evidence of improving the classroom through contributions to curriculum, and a commitment to the mission of the College of Humanities and Sciences through professional conduct.

**Outstanding Service to the University Community**

**CRITERIA:** Faculty member must be in good standing. This recognition is based on exceptional contributions to the University and College community as shown through mentoring of student activities, sponsorship of university events, or initiation of new services for students, faculty and other members of the University/College community. The record of achievement should reflect sustained contributions to the University/College over the past year.

**Outstanding Scholarship**

**CRITERIA:** Faculty member must be in good standing. This recognition is based on significant scholarly accomplishments that build new knowledge through traditional forms of academic research. This is demonstrated by peer reviewed academic and professional journal publications, academic or professional published books, book chapters, and completion of academic or professional grant research. An award committee selects faculty nominated in the categories. The Dean of Faculty then calls each faculty member congratulating them, and then a thank you gift is sent.

**Faculty Recognition Program Lessons Learned**

The program in general has been widely successful. The response to the Ongoing Recognition has been positive and appreciative. Some of the faculty responses included:

- You are very welcome. I would also like to thank you and the entire staff for supporting the faculty in their effort to help our students succeed.
- Thank you for your note about my recent excellent review! I have enjoyed teaching UOPX students for the last several years and find it a unique opportunity to reach out to nontraditional students using the latest education technology.
- You are so sweet! Thank you! Hope you had a relaxing and yummy Thanksgiving!
- Thank you. This was certainly not necessary, but it is appreciated!

Additionally, the faculty selected from a very large faculty in the Annual Recognition were quite appreciative of being called personally by the Dean of Faculty, and having the chance to talk about their work and achievements. Some challenges were soliciting nominations from the managers in the context of very busy work schedules. A related challenge was with the Ongoing Recognition as it requires substantial time to review data to then send the thank you notes or cards. Nevertheless, there are still benefits of proactive appreciation, and we are continuing with our program.

**Faculty and Staff Brown Bags**

Another program launched in September 2015 was our Brown Bags. To date, the College has hosted 50 Brown Bag sessions with more than 5,900 attendees. The purpose of the Brown Bag presentations is to promote academic discussions on content and pedagogy amongst faculty and staff, provide them with additional training and tools, as well as an opportunity to present research and engage with colleagues. This high profile project also highlights the College in the greater University of Phoenix academic community. Brown bags are held twice a month during a designated time for an hour. Typically the presentation runs for 45 minutes and leaves 15 minutes for questions. Links to the recorded presentation are provided in the library.

As mentioned, Brown Bag presentations cover a variety of topics, focusing on pedagogy and discipline areas. To ensure the quality of content and presentation skills, presentations are currently vetted in a 4 step process: Application; Interview; PowerPoint Review; and Practice Session. Goal: Increase frequency of advertisements.

Examples of Brown Bags include:

- Utilizing Military Teaching Strategies to Help All Students Succeed
- The Writer’s Memo: A Look Beneath the Surface
- Do You See What I See? A Discussion of the University’s Mobile App
To increase participation, the Brown Bags are advertised in our faculty meetings. We Rise newsletter, campus leadership meetings, our faculty communities, and Word Press. Invitations, according to the following sample, are sent out to all active teaching faculty and staff. [Annex B]

Brown Bags Lessons Learned

At first, our technology systems capped participation at 200 participants. After researching alternative options, we found a system that allowed unlimited capacity per session and integrated audio, which solved the bandwidth issue. We shifted this option over in October. Additionally, at first, we had session presenters do two presentations: one in the morning, and one in the afternoon to accommodate schedules. Feedback indicated that faculty still wanted more options based on different time zones. However, while many internal presenters were amenable to doing two sessions, soliciting presenters outside of the University proved problematic given busy schedules. Further, looking at the participation data, we discovered more faculty were attending the afternoon session. Thus, the decision was made to do one session, while heavily advertising the recorded link available in the library. Furthermore, sending out an invitation to thousands of faculty and staff proved difficult and time consuming. Thus, in 2017, we will switch from sending out invites to heavily advertising our Word Press site so that faculty can check our centralized engagement site for Brown Bag times and dates, while also finding links to the recorded presentations. Another challenge is that Brown Bag administration requires substantial time to review and hold presentations. In 2017 the Brown Bag administration will receive a support from full time faculty so that this is ameliorated. Further, it will allow for the expansion of the Brown Bags from twice a month to once a week.

We Rise Newsletter

The College’s We Rise quarterly Newsletter was launched in August 2015 and provides an opportunity to recognize faculty accomplishments, provide college and curriculum updates, and share scholarly insights and endeavors. To date, the College has published five quarterly newsletters with a total of more than 120 articles written by faculty and staff. Newsletter is perhaps a misnomer. In addition to announcements and faculty recognition, published are high quality articles and thought pieces written on a variety of subjects. Some examples include:

- An Effective, Engaging First-Year Experience
- Teaching Military Veterans in the Classroom

Women’s Satisfaction on the Job
Writing Fiction is a World of Fantasy
Modeling APA for Students
Student Peer Social Support
Using Games in the Classroom

Additionally, there is an Editor and small volunteer Editorial Staff. Articles are currently edited as follows:

- Top line editor completes initial review.
- Any issues or concerns are addressed by:
  - Author rewrites.
  - In-house rewrites.
  - Writing specialist assistance.
- Executive editor and managing editor meet to discuss final list of articles, placement of articles, priority of articles, and layout of photos.
- PDF of newsletter based on InDesign template.
- Copy editing team reviews for errors.
- Leadership review and approval.
- Dean of Faculty for final approval.

To increase readership, the Newsletter is advertised in our faculty meetings, We Rise newsletter, campus leadership meetings, our faculty communities, and Word Press. The Newsletter is also sent out to all active teaching faculty and staff.

We Rise Newsletter Lessons Learned

In 2017 the Newsletter Editor will receive a staff of full time faculty so that this is ameliorated. Furthermore, sending out an invitation to thousands of faculty and staff proved difficult and time consuming. Thus, in 2017, we will switch from sending out the Newsletter heavily advertising our Word Press site so that faculty and staff can check our centralized engagement site and find not only the Newsletter but a call for submissions. This will allow for a digitized Newsletter were we will be able to track how many times a specific article is accessed, as well as comments added to the article. We still need to actively seek out contributions to the Newsletter with full time faculty writing one third of the articles, followed by staff and associate faculty.

Faculty Word Press

The College’s Word Press site was launched on October 28, 2016 to provide a single point of information and support resources for all faculty and staff. The site is comprehensive, providing faculty and staff with a plethora of information to support development.
Specifically, the Word Press site contains the following information:

- Home Page
  - Announcements from College and University leadership
- About Us
  - College of Humanities and Sciences purpose, mission and vision
  - Information about executive and College leaders, and our faculty council
- Community of Scholars
  - Resources to help faculty present and publish
  - Collaboration on scholarship
- Community of Practice
  - Explore teaching techniques shared by fellow faculty
  - Learn ways to ensure materials meet 508 compliance
  - Learn about upcoming Brown Bag opportunities and access recordings of recent faculty presentations
- Recognition
  - Celebrate the accomplishments of the College’s faculty
  - Learn about and participate in the recognition process
- Resources
  - Content specific and pedagogical resources
  - Subject area guides
  - Information about accreditation

The Community of Scholars and Community of Practice are a particular focal point of the site. While there are extensive resources available, beginning in 2017, faculty will be able to submit requests for mentoring through each of the landing pages. Full time faculty and other campus leaders are in the process of going through a training program to learn how to support and mentor other faculty.

**Word Press Lessons Learned**

The Word Press site is meant to bring together thousands of faculty across the country. We will have to continually advertise to get faculty used to the idea of going to a central location for resources and support. While there was significant input from faculty and staff on the areas of focus, once the site was launched, we concluded additional information would be necessary, including a focus on curriculum development, assessment, and an area for faculty to submit feedback on curriculum, as well as requests to be contributors as subject matter experts.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this plan was to develop and implement a cohesive faculty recognition program that would serve to spotlight and showcase the various scholarly and teaching activities of online faculty who had few formalized means of collaborating and sustaining dialogue with one another. Strong professional learning communities are emerging as a result of these activities and faculty are contributing and connecting with one another in unprecedented ways at this institution. Due to the scope and breadth of the institution, we were challenged to develop and implement a sustainable and scalable faculty recognition program. Next steps are to continue incorporating constructive feedback from faculty and the college leadership team to ensure continue improvement and the dissemination of lessons learned.
Faculty Recognition Announcement

To promote and support our College culture of engaged teaching, scholarship, and service, we are announcing our College Faculty Recognition Program. Through this program, faculty are recognized for their accomplishments, anniversaries, and contributions in support of student success.

COHS Leadership (i.e. Dean of Faculty, Academic Dean, Program Deans, Campus College Chairs, Faculty Quality Managers, and Lead Faculty Area Chairs) as well as faculty, are encouraged to submit nominations by completing the attached Quarterly Faculty Recognition Submission Template.

The Faculty Recognition Committee made up of leadership volunteers, review the nominations quarterly. Chosen faculty will be highlighted quarterly in the Phoenix Rising Newsletter and on the COHS Website for their achievements and accomplishments.

The recognition program will culminate each year with annual recognitions presented by the College’s leadership team.

Thank you for your hard work and dedication to our students.

Regards,

Elena Mastors, PhD
Dean of Faculty, College of Humanities and Sciences

Sample Brown Bag Announcement

Message for All Faculty in the College of Humanities and Sciences

In the April 26th, 2016 Faculty Brown Bag session, Judith Starkston, Kevin Walsh, Kristen McQuinn, and Bjorn Mercer shared valuable information and tools in their Getting Started with Academic Blogging presentation. A copy of the PowerPoint presentation is attached.

A recording of the meeting will be temporarily available at the following link for anyone who was not able to attend.

If you are using Windows 10 and have any trouble viewing the presentation, please contact WebEx Technical Support at 800-374-1852.

The schedule for the May Brown Bags is listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Presenter(s)</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 10, 2016</td>
<td>10 am</td>
<td>Erin Lyden and Jane King</td>
<td>Fostering Student Peer Social Support and Camaraderie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 19, 2016</td>
<td>10 am</td>
<td>Nathan Coley</td>
<td>“English is My Worst Subject:” The Need for Writing Across the Curriculum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We encourage you to submit ideas for a future Brown Bag session to our COHS team at: cohsnewsletter@phoenix.edu.

Please make sure to include the Faculty Brown Bags Presenter Application.

Elena Mastors, PhD
Dean of Faculty, College of Humanities and Sciences
REFERENCES

Boyer E. L. (1990), Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate, Princeton, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching