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Evaluation and Mentoring of Online Faculty

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EVALUATION AND MENTORING OF ONLINE FACULTY

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ABSTRACT

The world of online education has created new challenges to these unique learning environments. One such challenge is the evaluation and mentorship of online faculty. This article seeks to present an effective model for evaluation and mentorship of online and distance faculty that promotes effective education skills for pre-service and practicing professionals based on suggestions from the review of literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A unique and ever-changing environment separates teaching and learning by space and time in the form of online and distance learning (Gallien and Oomen-Early, 2008). Higher education institutions that offer courses online face the unique challenge of having faculty teach courses from a distance instead of being housed in a residential format. The role of the professor has taken on a new role. In these environments a professor no longer lectures or provides group activities as they lead the class. This review of the literature and research seeks to investigate how to mentor and evaluate faculty for effective instruction in online classrooms.

Based on a review of institutions, it appears that online and Internet delivery models of learning are here to stay. The following data indicate that many institutions have embraced online learning (Kushniroff, 2008):

1. Eighty-one percent of all institutions of higher education offer at least one fully Internet-based or blended course.
2. Complete Internet-based degree programs are offered by 34 percent of the institutions.
3. Among public institutions, the numbers are even more compelling; with 97 percent now offering at least one Internet-based course and 49 percent now able to offer a complete Internet-based degree program.
4. Perhaps most telling, when asked about the role of Internet-based education for the future of their institution, 67 percent of the institutions' administration answered that it is a critical long-term strategy for their institution.

In addition, within a context of America's fallen economy in addition to the rise of technology advances, institutions of higher education are utilizing increased educational opportunities without increased budgets. More specifically they are creating Internet education. At the most basic level, Internet-based education takes place when the instructor and

the student(s) are separated by physical distance and technology, often in concert with face-to-face communication that is used to bridge the instructional gap. As stated in the publicity materials of many universities, these types of programs can provide adults with a second chance at a college education, reach those disadvantaged by limited time, distance or physical disability, and update the knowledge base of workers at their places of employment.

There are many things to consider when investigating a professor's role in online learning. For example, their communication styles and mode, their ability to have academic freedom to cover their content, types of grading feedback, their knowledge of the field of education, their knowledge of instructional technology, and their ability to guide students through the course content are just a few examples of the unique issues to online learning. To make this matter even more complicated, in the field of education, these professors also need to determine how to best mentor and educate our pre-service teachers as well as evaluate their methodology and pedagogical knowledge and skills. It is critical for the success of these candidates that these programs are effectively monitoring and mentoring their online faculty for these virtual classroom environments.

Higher education has given priority to the integration of technology into the curriculum. As this has occurred, institutions are faced with the many issues that surround making the lessons succeed technologically. It is, therefore, easy for the instructional design of such curricula to be put on the side while we get technology issues under control. Faculty need to focus on learning theory in the design of instructional technology so that they can create lessons that are not only technology-effective, but that are meaningful from the learner's standpoint.

Research by Melhenbacher (2000) indicated that key factors affect faculty perceptions of both experiences. Responding to student demand for Internet-based learning environments requires faculty to venture into a nontraditional classroom-based learning. In spite of a willingness to try this style of teaching, multiple issues surface which are not present in a traditional classroom-based setting. These issues are broadly included under the umbrella of a pedagogical paradigm shift.

Teachers at the college level need to be adequately prepared for Internet-based instruction and knowledgeable about their student population. Faculty prepare Internet-based curriculum prior to the launch of the class, and this ensures a common thread runs through each of the lectures. These tasks place an extra burden on Internet-based faculty, requiring more advance preparation and planning than is necessary for the traditional classroom-based learning faculty. Faculty must adjust to the different nature and requirements of Internet-based classes. Information gathered from the institution in this case study indicated that education faculty members are often surprised at how much extra time is involved when they first teach an Internet-based course. And after having taught the course a few times, faculty reported that it still is equal to a residential education course. It is a common expectation that Internet-based faculty will be available to respond to students' questions five to seven days a week. Some institutions offering Internet-based classes expect faculty to be prompt in responding to students' questions, often within 24 hours.

Internet-based learning environments require the instructor to facilitate extensive written communications. The discussion boards and other assignments prevent a student from being able to "hide in the back of a class" as they could in a traditional brick-and-mortar school. However, this also requires intense feedback and communication between the faculty and student for engagement to take place. Further, Internet-based communication forces the voicing of all the students, whereas in traditional classroom based learning, learners may not contribute to discussions. In an Internet-based classroom, students can verbally participate, as there is a requirement to post meaningful contributions for all to see in each class and share scholarly materials.

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Shifting to the role of facilitator requires faculty to reconsider the presentation of the materials. In a face-to-face class, students wait for the instructor to start class and hand out syllabi, and they follow the instructor's lead; in online learning, the student initiates the action by going to the website and posting a message or doing something. Additionally, due to anonymity, students may feel a certain equality with faculty while posting messages. Faculty, however, enjoy the dynamics when proper communication takes place. Internet-based faculty must think about how material is presented because eye-to-eye contact is absent. Teaching moves instructors from the traditional classroom-based role of in front of the room (Shaw, Scott, and McGuire, 2001) to a facilitation role, where an instructor cannot check body language to scan learner concern or understanding.

In addition to these many complex issues, higher education institutions with a biblical worldview have to be further concerned that the integration of faith is not only part of the content presented in an online course, but that the online faculty are able to model, dialogue, and instruct in such a way to demonstrate the Christian integration of subject matter. These many complex issues surrounding online learning increase the need for mentoring and evaluating online faculty.

MENTORING OF FACULTY

Angulo and De La Rosa (2006) determined from their study on e-mentoring (electronic mentoring) that online faculty should follow a mentor model. They argue that the mentor be used as a context for training. In their analysis they determined that the mentoring process is threefold, and consists of planning and organization of the role of the mentors and the collection of assessment. The model depicted below combines two key attributes for the monitoring of online faculty: mentoring and assessment.

Leman and Pentak (2004) identify seven principles of effective leadership/mentorship in their book *The Way of the Shepherd*. These principles describe the mentorship that is modeled by the true Shepherd in Psalm 23:

1. Know the condition of your flock. An effective mentor monitors the status of people, as well as the status of work.
2. Discover the "shape" of your sheep (strengths, heart, attitude, personality, experiences).
3. Help your sheep identify with you. Mentors set high standards for performance, and they communicate their values and mission. Great leadership is personal, not just professional.
4. Make your pasture a safe place. An effective mentor keeps people well informed and makes expectations clear.
5. The staff of direction. Mentors know where they are going, get out in front, keep their flock on the move, and set clear boundaries.
6. The rod of correction. Effective mentors protect, correct, and inspect their flock.
7. The heart of the shepherd. Most of all, mentors have a heart for their sheep.

CASE STUDY OF FACULTY MENTORING IN ONLINE GRADUATE EDUCATION PROGRAM

The institution in this study is one of the larger online universities. It is also an evangelical, private university. Approximately 38,000 online students were enrolled at the university during the study, with 4,000 students in the School of Education and over 150 residential and online full- and part-time education faculty. The oversight structure (Figure 1) for mentoring online faculty is managed by an associate dean in collaboration with an Online Chair, who oversees Instructional Mentors (IMs). Each IM oversees approximately 20 online faculty who serve as a "classroom" of online faculty learners. In addition, two Faculty Support Coordinators (FSC) assist with faculty technology and training issues.

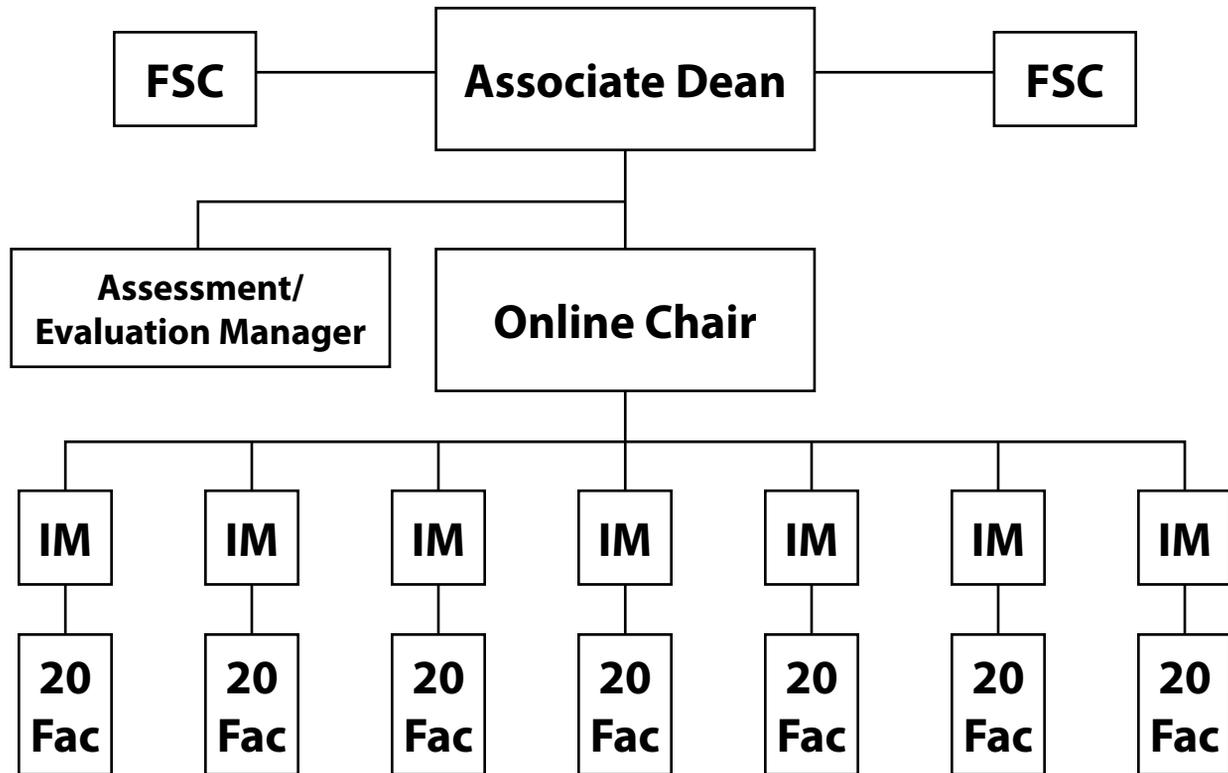


Figure 1. Oversight structure for mentoring online faculty

GUIDELINES FOR INSTRUCTIONAL MENTORS

The guidelines for Instructional Mentors (IMs) apply the principles for effective mentorship described by Leman and Pentak (2004) as the Good Shepherd in Psalm 23. The IM guidelines for Communication apply Principles 1–3: (1) know the condition of your flock, (2) discover the shape of your sheep, and (3) help your sheep identify with you.

COMMUNICATION

1. Online Chair posts weekly announcements/reminders to the Faculty Communication Center (FCC).
2. Online Chair sends mass e-mail of additional announcements pertaining to Internet/Blackboard upgrades.
3. Instructional Mentors handle any other reminders in addition to the mass e-mails.
4. Online consortium on Blackboard is used to share ideas with other Instructional Mentors from other departments.

Instructions to the IM for Initial Roll-out apply Principles 4–5: (4) Make your pasture a safe place, and (5) The staff of direction.

INITIAL ROLL-OUT

1. Instructional Mentor contacts each professor in the week prior to course start date for introduction and outline of expectations (i.e., items that are reviewed in reference to their work). IM contact information is provided to faculty, including e-mail address and phone number.
 2. Associate Dean e-mails the online faculty to inform them of the oversight structure.
- IM guidelines for Management are related to Principles 6–7: (6) The rod of correction, and (7) The heart of the shepherd.

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MANAGEMENT

1. Instructional Mentor sets up a system for contacts on a calendar (e.g., checking in with adjuncts at beginning and end of a term). Encouragement and helpful advice is provided as needed.
2. Instructional Mentor sets up a system for checking classes for quality assurance.
3. Instructional Mentor seeks opportunities and ways to encourage and mentor faculty.

Each online faculty member participates in a formal evaluation by the IM once a year. In addition to the Faculty Evaluations reported in this study, course evaluations are conducted and analyzed in a similar manner by faculty designated for each course as Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) as well as the IM. Student Course Evaluations are also collected each semester for each course. The Assessment Coordinator compiles the evaluations in order to determine where improvements can be made.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The faculty evaluation system described in this study was implemented in Fall, 2008 for the Graduate School of Education's Online Program. Data are reported from the first year of implementation, Fall, 2008–Spring, 2009. The Instructional Mentors (IMs) submitted assessment for 29 online faculty in Fall 2008 and for 32 online faculty in Spring 2009.

Table 1 provides Faculty Composite Evaluations for Fall 2008 and Spring 2009. Online faculty were instructed to complete the Instructor Self-Evaluation column and return the form to the Instructional Mentor (IM). The IM then filled out the IM column, signed it, and returned the form to the instructor for the instructor's signature. The IM retains the original and submits a copy to the Online Chair.

Table 1 - Faculty Composite Evaluations – Fall 2008/Spring 2009

Instructions for Online Faculty: Using the scale below, please complete the Instructor Self Evaluation column and return the form to your Instructional Mentor (IM). Your IM will fill out the IM column, sign it, and return it to you for signature. Please sign it, make a copy for your records, and return the original to the Instructional Mentor.

Instructions for IM's : Please retain a copy of this evaluation in your department files. Submit a copy to your Online Chair/Associate Dean/Dean.

Department: _____ Graduate School of Education _____ Dean _____

Instructor Self-Evaluation	Scale (Numeric value)	Instructional Mentor Evaluation
My performance exceeds expectations in this area.	(4)	The instructor exceeds expectations in this area.
My performance meets expectations in this area.	(3)	The instructor meets expectations in this area.
My performance is below expectations in this area.	(2)	The instructor's performance is below expectations in this area.
My performance is unsatisfactory in this area.	(1)	The instructor's performance is unsatisfactory in this area.

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Performance Criteria for <u>All</u> Online Program Instructors Fall 2008, N=29; Spring 2009, N=32	Instructor Evaluation		IM Evaluation	
	Fall 2008	Spr. 2009	Fall 2008	Spr. 2009
1. Instructor evidences agreement with and ability to integrate a Christian worldview consistent with that of the University into his or her instruction.	3.3	3.48	3.5	3.58
2. Instructor treats students with respect, encourages questions, and demonstrates flexibility in dealing with students.	3.92	3.79	4	3.79
3. Instructor participates in and requires students to participate in focused and meaningful discussions (including but not limited to discussion boards/forums).	3.08	3.41	3.25	3.17
4. Instructor provides meaningful and substantive help to students; responds to e-mail, discussion postings and phone messages within established time standards*; and encourages students to seek assistance when needed.	3.5	3.69	3.7	3.41
5. Instructor understands and follows University and department policies and procedures; treats colleagues and College staff with respect, turns in required documentation and grades on time, etc.	3.6	3.55	3.75	3.72
6. Instructor incorporates course materials/activities to promote listening, speaking, writing, and higher order/critical thinking skills.	3.25	3.38	3.2	3.38
7. Instructor demonstrates enthusiasm for learning as evident by knowledge of subject matter in feedback in grading, discussion boards, and other correspondence with students.	3.6	3.59	3.7	3.69
8. Instructor provides substantive feedback to students on assignments, as appropriate.	3.3	3.55	3	3.21
9. Instructor demonstrates current knowledge of academic discipline and maintains academic standards appropriate to the course.	3.6	3.55	3.5	3.62
10. Instructor keeps accurate and timely records (grades, attendance roster, test scores, etc.).	3.5	3.55	3.5	3.66
11. Instructor shows consideration for needs of students as evident by accommodations allowed and utilizing various teaching strategies.	3.75	3.48	3.7	3.66
12. Instructor contributes to the success of students at risk and to the retention of all students as evident by feedback and grading.	3.3	3.52	3.2	3.62
13. Instructor encourages active learning by following up on all students to encourage participation.	3.3	3.59	3.3	3.48
14. Instructor maintains professional rapport with students in written and oral communication.	3.5	3.66	3.75	3.76
15. Instructor encourages students to pursue appropriate University services (e.g. learning support, financial aid, etc.).	3.3	3.31	3.3	3.38
16. Overall Effectiveness as a member of the LUO Teaching Team.	3.6	3.55	3.3	3.47

Responses to 16 items used a Likert scale from 1–unsatisfactory to 4–exceeds expectations. The averages were positive (≥ 3.0) for all ratings on the Evaluation Form. For each set of 16 ratings, 9 to 11 of the average ratings were ≥ 3.5 . Out of the sixteen questions on the Evaluation Form, the instructors in the Spring 2009 group rated themselves higher on ten items as compared to the Fall 2008 group; and the IMs rated the spring group higher in nine areas as compared to fall. The items on which there was greatest increase were: feedback by the instructors (item 12), follow-up (item 13), and written communication to students (item 14). The item that received the highest average ratings in both semesters, and from both instructor self-evaluation and IM ratings, was #2 “treats students with respect, encourages questions, and demonstrates flexibility in dealing with students.” The item that received the lowest average rating from both instructor self-evaluation and IMs ratings was #3 “participates in and requires students to participate in focused and

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meaningful discussions.” These averages indicate that although there were higher ratings for the spring group in the area of communication, there is still room for improvement. As in the fall, the instructors rated themselves lower than the IM ratings on most items, which may indicate that their performance is stronger than they realize. The exceptions were (2), (3),(7) and (12)—an indication that the self-perception of the instructors regarding the course activities and their feedback may be less objective, since they rated themselves higher than the IM ratings on those items. Overall, there were some very positive ratings. However, the average of the Overall Effectiveness (item 16) of the Instructor Self-Evaluation responses in Spring 2009 was 3.55 on a 4.0 scale, which was lower than the 3.69 in Fall, 2008; and the average of Overall Effectiveness responses of the IMs was a 3.47, below the 3.66 in the fall. Perhaps instructors and IMs rated more stringently in the spring evaluations. Additional semesters will be required to determine data trends, especially when comparative annual ratings for the same instructors are available.

In addition to Likert-scale ratings, comments were also compiled from the Faculty Evaluation forms. The related Instructor comments, which followed the survey, included such remarks as “I encourage cooperation and expect graduate level performance; we learn from each other,” and “It is wonderful to work for a school that puts Christ first.”

Positive comments from IMs included that they were pleased with the instructors’ “integration of Christian worldview” and “discussion of faith.” They also commented that most grades and discussion board forums were posted in a timely manner. Many forums included personal replies to each student and each question. IMs commended the instructors for the consistency and positive interaction, and the quality and substance of announcements which were “encouraging, positive, and with necessary information.”

The IMs reported that final grade distributions tended to be skewed high, which may be appropriate for graduate-level courses. They recommended an increase in substantive feedback on graded assignments, with “embedded comments to help guide students with specific suggestions for improvement.” They also suggested that partial credit be given for late assignments. One suggested that in each weekly announcement, faith issues should be included.

Table 2 provides a summary of feedback based on the ratings and comments on the Instructor Self-Evaluation and IM Evaluation forms. A committee composed of the Associate Dean, Online Chair, and Faculty Support Coordinators, reviewed the feedback and developed the list of action items, persons responsible, and target completion dates. The action plan will be reviewed and updated annually based on feedback from the evaluation of online faculty in subsequent years.

Table 2 – Action plan based on results of Instructor Self-Evaluation and IM Evaluation

Feedback	Action Item	Responsible Persons	Completion Date
FCC – Faculty Communication Center • More discussion regarding biblical/Christian worldview • Instructions needed for using FCC • Information updated frequently	Video Video Update schedule	Dean IT/faculty FSC	August 2009 August 2009 Monthly
DB - Discussion Board • Need rubric for grading • Need private response option • Need substantive, quality responses to initial threads	Sample rubric Blackboard 9.0 Sample responses	SMEs IT/faculty IMs	May 2010 Jan 2010 Annually

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E-mails/Announcements • Better instruction to post announcements /e-mails • Positive follow-up and/or suggestions for improvement	Video/IM Evals	Dean	Annually
	IM/Student Evals	IMs	Annually
Grading • Assignment explanations included earlier • Correlation between LiveText and assignments should be explained • Feedback for every major assignment • Reflect graduate level thinking and writing • Supportive, positive, substantive feedback—including rationale for grade and suggestions for improvement	IM/Student Evals	Dean	Annually
	Video	IMs	
	IM/Student Evals	IMs	
	IM/Student Evals IM/Student Evals	IMs IMs	
University Services • Need information regarding university services	Video	Associate Dean	Annually

In conclusion, the online instructors evaluated in Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 were performing appropriately and adequately as measured by instructor self-evaluation and IM evaluation. Because of the growing trend of online instruction, it is critical that faculty are being mentored and evaluated on a consistent basis. As evident by previous research, mentors appear to be effective in promoting reflection and improvement of teaching knowledge (Angulo and De La Rosa, 2006). This large online university has designed and implemented a system for effective mentorship and evaluation of online faculty to ensure quality instruction and faculty.

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