E-Learning Faculty Focus Group Report

Fall 2010

Prepared by

The Academic Computing, Distance Learning and Instructional Technology Committee

(ACDLITC)

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Introduction

The Academic Computing, Distance Learning, and Instructional Technology (ACDLIT) committee, along with committee member and doctoral student, Amy Green, hosted three faculty focus groups in the fall of 2010 as a follow up to the spring 2010 Distance Faculty Forum. The purpose of the E-learning Faculty Focus Groups was threefold:

Goal 1. To provide a follow up forum in a smaller setting for faculty to share comments and concerns raised during the spring DE forum.

Goal 2. To report to the Faculty Senate a summary of the results gathered at the E-learning Focus Groups and offers recommendations for improvement.

Goal 3. To provide qualitative data for ACDLITC's committee member, Amy Green's doctoral research.

The first goal was achieved through full capacity at each focus group (32 attendees in all), allowing E-learning faculty an opportunity to share concerns and suggestions in a smaller setting that encourage peer interaction and feedback. Results from the focus groups can be found in this report.

The second goal, the completion of this report and its recommendations is addressed in this document.

The third goal was accomplished with the collection of rich and relevant qualitative data needed to complete a doctoral dissertation. The results of this research will greatly benefit the UAA

faculty members and administrative leadership by suggesting a direction and training model as

well as support for distance educators. The study will be complete in summer 2011.

Focus Group Questions and Discussion Findings

What type of training did you receive before teaching online (if any)?

Respondent training ranged from non-existent to extensive. Several faculty were AEIN (Alaska Educator's Innovative Network) grant recipients. This grant provided several week-long technology and DE intensives that provided a compensation stipend and travel expenses. Faculty who attended these trainings reported a better understanding of CM systems and DE pedagogy. Many had attended the Technology Fellow program and found this workshop to be beneficial. Concerns were raised that it seemed to focus more on the newest technology and did not always address pedagogy concepts and best practices. A small number of participants stated they were self-taught using "trial and error" to build courses. There was a feeling of frustration from this group that their needs were not being met and they were not sure of what resources existed when they were developing their classes. Several stated they also attended CAFE sessions but felt many sessions were not tailored to exactly what they needed and sessions were only offered sporadically. Several nursing faculty attended the discussions and this group reported high rates of satisfaction with their departmental instructional designer as she was discipline-specific and more accessible for one-on-one training and assistance. The general consensus was that even if resources were readily available, faculty were still confused on what options were available to them. One instructor stated, "You really had to go looking for help".

Did you receive compensation or release time for the training?

The few members that participated in the AEIN grant did receive stipends for the training. The Technology Fellows also offers a $1000 stipend for the year-long commitment to improve on distance classes and present these course changes or improvements to incoming tech fellows participants. Other faculty reported a 1-2 credit hour release time to develop distance courses with a .5 credit hour increase for each 3 credit hour distance class taught (due to the extra time demands brought about by teaching online). The majority of the focus group participants, however, reported receiving no compensation at all for the additional time and effort to transition or develop on-line classes. Another concern brought to the discussion was the general inconsistency among departments and faculty concerning release time or compensation for teaching distance. Many believed that release time was crucial to the success of their courses because it allowed them time to seek training and create a distance course based on best practices, pedagogy and student needs.

Did you receive support from your department head, dean or chair regarding training?

For the most part faculty participants did feel supported by their deans, directors and chairs when seeking training or developing distance courses. Nursing faculty especially felt as though their needs were being met by their dedicated instructional designer. There was a general consensus that while faculty were being supported, they were still on their own to seek resources and training during the development process since many deans and directors were unfamiliar with the transition process or because there was not clear, consistent procedures in place at a departmental level.

What were the biggest challenges in developing your online courses or transitioning your courses to distance?

Most of the faculty reported "lack of time" as their biggest challenge when developing their online courses. One faculty member stated, "This is when the course release became crucial because I could focus on the development, run a pilot and make adjustments before going "live". Without that dedicated time, my course felt thin rather than robust." Other challenges were as follows:

a. lack of timely access to IT when needed (during class or eLive sessions)

b. lack of standardized and/or required training

c. inconsistent definitions, codes and categories of web-based courses

d. inability to access resources- i.e., lack of continuity in FTC, inconsistent availability of training options

e. lack of time to develop courses to the expected quality levels

f. inconvenient upgrades/changes made to Blackboard system

g. not feeling "in the loop" about what was happening on campus regarding distance education and the Faculty Technology Center (FTC/emedia)

h. Funding/support issues at the department or college level

i. feelings of isolation- not being part of a "distance educators community"

j. inability to manage increased demands from students

What types of training or development have been <u>most</u> beneficial in preparing you to teach distance?

Most faculty participants reported that hands-on, one-on-one training with instructional designers was the most beneficial in assisting them with their discipline-specific challenges relating to distance teaching. One instructor stated that "follow up after the Technology Fellows Program was the instrumental in getting my plan running. The instructional designers at the time met with me on a monthly basis to make sure my project stayed on track." Having instructional designers "visit" the course in real time was also helpful. One professor stated, "She observed several of my eLive sessions and was able to give me very specific suggestions and pointers for improvement." Other training and development opportunities that participants found helpful were as follows:

    a. Peer networking and informal "support" groups within colleges for distance faculty to meet and discuss issues regularly

    b. Dedicated college instructional designers

    c. Mentorship programs

    d. "How to Teach Online" courses offered through other distance universities such as Walden and University of Phoenix

    e. Grant-funded AEIN program intensive

    f. Week-long 680-series classes/intensives offered in previous years (offered by former FTC (Faculty Technology Center/eMedia) designers Andy Page, Jerry Voltura, Teresa Derrickson, Kathy Baldwin) helped new-to-distance faculty members.

What types of training or development have been <u>least</u> beneficial in preparing you to teach distance?

Many of the faculty agreed that any training was better than no training but most were concerned about the quality of the training that they received. One faculty member stated, "In my group of Technology Fellows, faculty ability levels ranged from seasoned distance educator to novices that had never taught distance. It was difficult to address all of the different needs of each faculty member in that setting." One of the least beneficial types of training was for faculty to be taught to use Blackboard by students or student aids. One participant stated "I felt pretty inept and having a student show me what I was doing wrong did not buoy my confidence at all." CAFÉ sessions were met with mixed reviews. Some stated that they were too broad in content and that these generic workshops didn't fulfill their specific needs. Others praised CAFÉ efforts at filling in the blanks when the Faculty Technology Center/eMedia could not. "It is really just a pick and choose thing" said one instructor. "You get out of it what you can". Another stated frustration at CAFÉ sessions always being offered on Fridays when she was unavailable due to classes.

Do you feel that you need additional training or support in any areas related to distance teaching?

Most participants agreed that training in distance education is always on-going. Some felt that a mandatory training and course update for distance faculty should occur every 2-3 years to make sure they stay current not only in the technologies but pedagogy and best practices. "The technology changes so rapidly- I feel like I am always behind the curve and the quality of my courses suffers", stated one participant. One instructor recommended a "certified-online instructor" certificate or classes that a potential distance teacher would have to hold in order to

teach online, renewable every three years based on on-going professional development in that field. "I am concerned with the quality and consistency of distance classes offered at UAA", says one professor, "I think distance courses will be scrutinized to make sure students are meeting outcomes and there needs to be quality control." One participant stated, "I think all distance instructors should take an online class so they can see distance learning from a students' perspective. That was immensely helpful to me as a teacher."

What are the biggest obstacles facing distance educators at UAA today?

Many faculty believed that a lack of leadership and continuity contributed to obstacles in distance education at UAA. Some participants felt the turnover of instructional designers within the FTC had a negative impact on distance faculty. "I felt like every time I tried to use the center for a resource there would be a new face, a new name,- staff that were unfamiliar with my challenges and my discipline", stated one participant. Several faculty members expressed frustration at the low bandwidth in outlying rural areas where they teach. Faculty also felt like distance education as a whole was under-funded and not a priority for leadership. "It seems like the bricks and mortar buildings get priority. When will there be more investments in the infrastructure that distance faculty need?" asked one professor. Others felt consistency between MAU's and other campuses were the biggest challenge. One participant stated, "The redundancy between courses offered at various colleges and schools seems like such a waste". Others felt a consistent system of incentives should be established for faculty teaching or developing distance courses.

What recommendations would you make to a new distance educator?

Many of the focus group participants felt as though new distance faculty should be required to attend mandatory training before teaching online along with scheduled check-ins with instructional designers to iron out problems. Participants felt that new distance educators need to understand the time commitment and challenges specific to teaching online. "My expectations and the reality of teaching online were complete opposite" stated one instructor, "My advice would be to start with a guided program such as Tech Fellows as a point of entry." Another instructor advised, "Ask for course release time in developing your course. The quality of the course will be better." Several instructors thought that using the FTC's instructional designers during the semester was key to seeing the big picture. "I asked an instructional designer to "attend" one of my eLive sessions to take notes and make suggestions. She observed things as a third party that I would never notice- being so focused on just trying to run the session. That was valuable insight." One professor stated "Don't be afraid to ask questions or align yourself with a seasoned distance teacher as a mentor. We have all been there and most are happy to share their experiences."

What recommendations do you have for universities' administration in regards to preparing instructors to teach online?

Faculty participants had several recommendations for leadership regarding preparation and training for distance faculty. Recommendations were categorized as follows:

a. Consistent plan of compensation and incentives for distance/E-Learning course development

b. Mutual understanding of ownership of intellectual property and academic freedom

c. Acknowledgment of time and commitment required for distance teaching

d. Appropriate technical, design and production support for distance faculty members

e. Available orientation and training of institutional technologies

f. Support and guidance related to pedagogy and assessment strategies

What is your opinion on the reorganization of the Faculty Technology Center?

Several participants were in favor of the Faculty Technology Center/eMedia moving under CAFÉ as long as it remained faculty-led or -centered. Many also felt that the instructional designers should be given tenure-track faculty status. "This would hopefully reduce the amount of turnover in this position", stated one instructor. A number of participants felt it might be better if the FTC was dissolved and individual instructional designers were placed into colleges. "It makes more sense to have them be specific to the discipline and more accessible to faculty", said one professor. "I am concerned that without a new strategic model on how this center will function, we will forever be on this roller-coaster of inadequacy and students and faculty will suffer."

Focus Group Survey Results

A short, anonymous survey was also administered to the focus group participants prior to the group discussions. The results were as follows:

Question #1

How many years have you taught distance or blended courses at UAA?

- o 0-3 years
- o 4-6 years
- o 6-10 years
- o 10+ years

Response

28% of the respondents had 0-3 years DE teaching experience

53% of the respondents had 4-6 years DE teaching experience

15% of the respondents had 7-10 years DE teaching experience

4% of the respondents had 10+ years DE teaching experience

Question #2

What has been the primary source of your training for teaching distance education?

- o Faculty Technology Center
- o CAFE
- o Technology Fellowship Program
- o Peer taught
- o Self-taught
- o Other (please state:)

Response

50% of respondents used the FTC for training and resources

30% of respondents had been in the Technology Fellows Program

10% of respondents stated they were self-taught

10% of respondents used CAFE -related programs for training

Question #3

What is your main concern regarding training and support for distance educators at UAA?

- o leadership concerns
- o availability of training and resources
- o functionality of course management system (eLive, Blackboard)
- o funding
- o quality of training
- o other (please state):

Response

35% of respondents had leadership concerns

50% of respondents were concerned about the availability of training resources

10% of respondents were concerned about the functionality of the CMS

5% of respondents were concerned about funding

Recommendations

The data collected through faculty focus groups indicates that E-Learning will continue to significantly impact faculty, students and administration. Topics brought up by faculty during the focus groups encompassed many different areas within E-Learning. Because of the breadth of topic, ACDLITC has narrowed its recommendations to areas that Committee feels could be addressed in the short term:

1. Develop close collaboration between ACDLITC and the new eMedia workgroup to explore the recommendations listed on page 8 of this report, titled _E-learning Faculty Focus Group_ Report through annual strategic goals
2. Continue communication and commitment between faculty and administration on all faculty technology-related issues
3. Explore various options of funding for these recommendations including an increase or re-distribution of student technology and e-learning fees

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