

Research Brief: Best Practices in Online Faculty Development

October 2018

In the following research brief, Hanover Research examines best practices on faculty development, specifically highlighting academic development in support of online teaching staff.



Table of Contents

Best Practices in Online Faculty Development

<u>Executive Summary</u>	<u>Page 3</u>
<u>Online Classroom Overview</u>	<u>Page 4</u>
<u>Effective Online Teaching Practices</u>	<u>Page 5</u>
<u>Best Practices in Professional Development</u>	<u>Page 6</u>

Executive Summary

Best Practices in Online Faculty Development

Introduction

To assist institutions in developing high-quality faculty, Hanover examined best practices for academic development in support of online teaching staff. The analysis aims to provide insight into interrelated research questions about developing enhanced digital learning capabilities. The following analysis is based on a review of information drawn from publicly available data sources including academic journals and scholarly papers.

Research Questions



Key Findings

Research shows that having a focused team or specialized program for online faculty development is among the best practices for online academic development.

Not all faculty may proactively seek professional development on their own, so universities are encouraged to establish dedicated units for online instructional onboarding and support. These teams, centers, or programs provide faculty support and assistance during the online curriculum implementation process. Having a central hub for these resources also highlights the distinct needs of online faculty compared to campus peers.

Institutions should encourage a wide variety of teaching methods for online course content delivery to keep both students and faculty engaged.

Long lectures at times can lead to student disengagement. Authors of online faculty development books and best practice reports recommend to focus online delivery with active instruction, mixing different types of activities and formats. Despite the online format, faculty need to remain engaged and responsive to encourage continued engagement from students.

Active and engaged instruction is vital to online learning and teaching success.

In order to engage students who are not physically present in a classroom, online courses should encompass a mix of discussions, lecture, video and audio clips, and hands-on exercises. Online faculty are encouraged to be highly responsive (within one business day) and to clearly set expectations for participation and engagement.

Effective professional development programs provide a wide variety of resources for online faculty.

These resources include workshops (large groups, small groups, or customized 1:1), video, audio, and other media support with an IT professional, help with instruction design and assessment, and also legal knowledge (e.g., copyright issues, FERPA guidelines). It is also helpful for professional development units to organize faculty into working groups to discuss effective practices and workshop curriculum changes with colleagues with similar experiences.

The Online Classroom

Leaders at [Penn State World Campus](#), one of the largest and most widely recognized online education providers in the higher education sector, developed 10 principles to guide online instruction. Most of these practices center on **setting expectations for both faculty and students**. This is so important because “the asynchronous online classroom has little or no similarity to the classroom experience. There may be no ‘class schedule,’ no meeting room or physical location, and, certainly in the asynchronous classroom, no defined timeframe for operation” ([Ragan](#)).

Expectations are not only important for students, who may never have taken online courses, but also for faculty to ensure that standards are understood and met similar to on-campus instruction. Experts in the field highlight the importance of developing and regularly reviewing institution-wide quality standards for online education delivery. According to [Dr. Cathy Stone](#), a leader in the field, “quality online education needs to be viewed as central to the institution’s core business. Quality standards for online teaching, learning design, and student support need to be developed and clearly articulated at a senior institutional level.” Specifically, this includes:

- Close consultation with experts and relevant stakeholders within the institution
- The use of other research evidence
- Appointment of strategy leaders or “champions” at executive, faculty, school, and division levels of the institutions, to take responsibility for and oversee the development, dissemination, implementation, and continuous quality improvement of the standards
- Standards are embedded within the institutional strategic plan

Show Up and Teach

Students in an online course rely on the instructor to follow the established course schedule and to deliver the course within the scheduled time frame. The online instructor is expected to make schedule adjustment as needed to manage special circumstances.

Practice Proactive Course Management Strategies

These strategies include, but are not limited to, monitoring assignment submissions, communicating and reminding students of missed and/or upcoming deadlines, and making course progress adjustments as necessary.

Establish Patterns of Course Activities

Establishing and communicating a course pace and pattern of work can aid both instructor and student and alleviate confusion of course operation.

Plan for the Unplanned

Instructors need to communicate changes to the established pattern if they are unable to log on to the course for more than four business days. Established patterns reduce stress and frustration on the part of the learner.

Response Requested and Expected

Timely instructor feedback is essential for the online learning experience (within one business day).

Think Before You Write

Feedback on assignments is most helpful to students when clear and concise language is used to explain the degree to which relevant course outcomes have been met. Even when student questions are vague, instructors are encouraged to stimulate dialog that will help students understand and communicate their needs.

Help Maintain Forward Progress

The instructor is asked to facilitate student progress by submitting grades for all digitally formatted assignments and exams to students within two business days of receipt.

Safe and Secure

It is highly recommended that all course-related communication between the instructor and the student occur within institutionally supported and maintained communication systems (preferably within an LMS).

Quality Counts

Instructors should monitor and address dimensions of the course that may impact course integrity, including inaccurate course content, editing errors, confusing information, broken links, and other course design issues.

(Double) Click a Mile on My Connection

Instructors need to adequately understand the online learning platform available to the online learner (e.g., be able to functionally operate it).

Source: [Ragan](#)

Learning Communities and Instructor Support

Faculty members need professional development specifically geared toward the challenge of creating courses for digital delivery.

One important aspect of effective online teaching is to make it a group effort by having a faculty development program that aids faculty in adjusting to teaching online, providing assistance during the online implementation process by creating a team, or developing a center for online teaching and learning ([Vaill and Testori](#)). For example, Bay Path University in the United States developed a Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) when the school first began offering online programs in 2007. The center oversees the course development process and provides support for both online faculty and students ([Vaill and Testori](#)).

Effective Online Teaching

A primary source of disengagement for online learners is experiencing or perceiving a lack of instructor connection and support.

Faculty play an important role in ensuring that students experience a connection in their online courses. Multiple studies describe instructor support and responsiveness as key factors in online learning and important to engagement and persistence ([Budash and Shaw](#); [Gaytan](#)). A study of 485 online students at Penn State World Campus indicated instructor engagement in discussion and feedback to be associated with, and predictive of, high student engagement. ([Bigatel and Edel-Malizia](#))

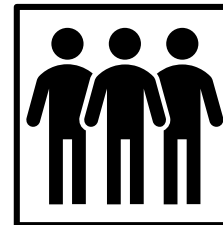
Instructor Behaviors Predicting High Engagement

- Prompt and meaningful feedback
- Prompting students to reflect on learning and think deeply about course content

Instructor Behaviors Ranked High in Engagement

- Participating in student discussions
- Prompting students to reflect on learning and think deeply about course content
- Creating a supportive and safe learning environment

Source: [Bigatel and Edel-Malizia](#)

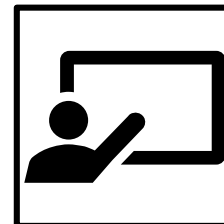


MAKE IT A GROUP EFFORT

Universities should develop online faculty development programs, teams to lead that school's online teaching efforts, or develop a dedicated center for online learning.

FOCUS ON ACTIVE LEARNING

The course should be a mix of discussion, collaboration, video, clips, and hands-on exercises.

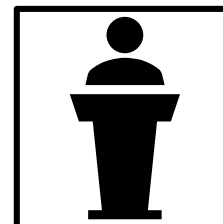
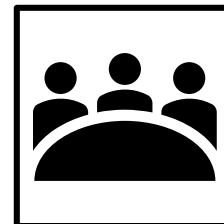


"CHUNK" THE LESSONS

Long lectures have been proven to result in disengagement. Content should be presented in 10 minute "chunks" and in varying formats to avoid disengagement.

KEEP GROUP SIZES SMALL

To encourage participation, especially in an online format, classes should be capped at no more than 20 or 30 students.



BE PRESENT

Instructor presence and engagement is a key factor in successful online instruction.

Source: [O'Malley](#)

Best Practices in Professional Development

Best Practices in Online Faculty Development

Professional Development Best Practices

Online education is continuing to grow, with over 6.3 million students taking at least one online course in 2016 in the United States, for example, representing the 14th consecutive year of increases ([Friedman](#)). Because of this continuing growth, faculty professional development is becoming a major focus, as many distance educators did not take online courses themselves and teach as they were taught in a face-to-face setting ([Schmidt, Tschida, & Hodge](#)). As more and more institutions develop online learning environments, it is essential that administrators support faculty and provide them with effective professional development opportunities ([Vaill and Testori](#)).

In a study conducted by [Mohr and Shelton](#), researchers used the Delphi Method (i.e., a procedure designed to have a panel of experts reach a consensus on a particular topic) to explore effective online faculty development. The data yielded 41 best practices for professional development, 16 institutional best practices, and 11 online classroom contextual best practices.

Mohr and Shelton's Best Practices For Institutions

Best practices for institutional strategies were categorized into three areas: supportive campus climate, institution specific expectations for online learning, and staffing support.

Campus Climate

- Clear organizational structure to support online programs
- Institution coordination of quality assurance standards
- Time allowance for online material development and training

Institution Expectations

- Faculty mentoring and adequate professional development opportunities (including course design templates)
- Policy, faculty evaluation, teaching guidelines

Staff Support

- Instructional designers and technologists to support faculty
- Online course development
- Troubleshooting
- Support for creating class media
- Audio/visual resource support

Source: [Mohr and Shelton](#)

Mohr and Shelton's Best Practices For Professional Development

Best practices for professional development were categorized into four areas: faculty roles, classroom design, learning processes, and understanding legal issues in the online classroom.

Faculty Roles

- Developing a teaching presence in the online classroom
- Faculty strategies to connect with online students
- Understanding the role of the faculty member in the online classroom

Classroom Design

- Developing a student centered learning environment
- Creating online course content and assessments
- Online discussion board management

Learning Processes

- Adapting technology and teaching pedagogy for the online classroom
- Applying active learning strategies
- Writing measurable course objectives

Legal Issues

- Copyright compliance and fair use
- FERPA guidelines (U.S. law giving parents certain protections with their children's academic records)
- Academic Integrity

HR HANOVER
RESEARCH

