

Online Human Touch (OHT) Training & Support: A Conceptual Framework to Increase Faculty Engagement, Connectivity, and Retention in Online Education, Part 2

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Abstract

Enrollment growth in online education now far exceeds overall higher education growth in the United States. As reported by Allen and Seaman (2008), the online enrollment growth rate increased 12% from fall 2006 to fall 2007 while the overall higher education growth rate increased only 1.2%. In fall 2007, there were approximately 3.9 million students enrolled in at least one online course. It is predicted that online enrollments will continue to increase as a result of greater national acceptance of online education by employers, baby boomers returning to college, and a weak economy. Faculty are critical in meeting current and predicted online enrollment increases, particularly since their role extends beyond classroom instruction. Faculty play a vital role in student engagement, retention, and long-term program sustainability. Therefore, the Master of Science in Higher Education Program at Drexel University has developed and implemented the concept of Online Human Touch (OHT) training and support to proactively engage, connect, and retain online faculty. This interactive and personalized approach to working with online faculty has resulted in high retention rates and high levels of satisfaction for faculty and students. This article is the second of a two-part series that focuses on OHT in online education.

Key words: Online education, distance education, faculty, part-time faculty, engagement, faculty development, adjunct faculty, retention, attrition, community development, faculty engagement, communication, training

Introduction

The conceptual framework for Online Human Touch (OHT) was developed originally in fall 2005 to proactively support student engagement and retention for the launching of a new, fully online Master of Science in Higher Education (MSHE) Program in the School of Education at Drexel University. OHT strategies were developed and integrated into all instruction and programming over a 12-month period to (a) actively engage students, (b) incorporate work-integrated learning, (c) foster and support community development, and (d) personally connect students to Drexel University as future alumni (Betts, 2008). Data collected from course evaluations, interviews, and focus groups over the first academic year indicated high levels of student engagement and satisfaction with the MSHE Program. Therefore, the MSHE Program began developing a conceptual framework for OHT training and support to engage, connect, and retain online full-time and part-time faculty. In fall 2006, the OHT training and support conceptual framework was fully integrated into the MSHE Program including faculty recruitment, training, mentoring, support, and professional development.

The OHT training and support concept is based on two primary assertions. First, faculty are more likely to teach in an online program, be engaged as online instructors, and continue teaching online, if they feel connected to and supported by the program and the campus community. Second, as faculty become more comfortable and innovative in the online classroom using new technologies and instructional approaches, concurrently, there will be increases in student engagement, connectivity, and retention. The OHT training and support concept is a holistic approach that involves the program director, program staff, and institutional support staff developing a personal connection between all faculty and Drexel University.

This personal connection and bond is particularly important for part-time faculty who may spend limited or no physical time on campus.

To date, the implementation of OHT training and support for faculty has been successful. Since fall 2005/06, the MSHE Program has grown from its first cohort of 26 students to 175 students in fall 2008/09. The number of faculty has grown from one full-time and three part-time faculty to 37 full-time and part-time faculty. The overall student retention rate for the MSHE Program is 83% and the three-year faculty retention rate is 93%. This personalized approach to online education has resulted in continued program growth, financial sustainability, high retention rates for students and faculty, high levels of satisfaction among students and faculty, and national recognition for best practices in online education by the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) in April 2008.

Review of Literature

Over the past five years, online student enrollment in the United States has grown steadily. According to *Staying the Course* (Allen & Seaman, 2008), online enrollment is significantly outpacing overall higher education student enrollment rates in the United States. From fall 2006 to fall 2007, the online enrollment growth rate increased 12% as the overall higher education growth rate increased only 1.2% (Allen & Seaman, 2008). While online enrollments are predicted to increase, attrition still remains higher for online programs than on-campus programs. Online attrition rates are often cited within the literature as 20% to 50% (Diaz, 2002; Frankola, 2001). However, attrition has been reported to be as high as 70% to 80% (Dagger & Wade, 2004; Flood, 2002). Additional publications cite online attrition to be 10% to 20% higher than traditional on-campus programs (Angelino, Williams & Natvig, 2007; Carr, 2000).

Nationally, there are limited statistics available on the current number of faculty who teach online and there are no available statistics specifically relating to online faculty attrition. The 2007 Digest of Education Statistics, published by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), reported that in fall of 2005 there were 1.3 million faculty members in the United States employed at degree-granting institutions which are "defined as postsecondary institutions that grant an associate's or higher degree and are eligible for Title IV federal financial aid programs" (p. 261). Of the 1.3 million faculty members, 0.7 million were employed full-time and 0.6 million employed part-time faculty. The 2007 report did not include the number of faculty who teach in distance education programs.

Why do faculty teach in online education programs? Studies over the past 10 years reveal that intrinsic factors are stronger motivators than extrinsic factors for faculty participation in online education (Betts, 1998; Taylor & White, 1991; Parker, 2003; Miller and Husman, 1999; Wolcott & Betts, 1999; Maguire, 2005; Bonk, 2001; Lee, 2001; Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, & Marx, 1999; Schifter, 2000; Wilson, 2001). Factors identified by faculty as being intrinsically motivating to teach online include reaching new audiences, self-satisfaction, opportunity to develop new ideas, opportunity to use new technologies, intellectual challenge, and overall job satisfaction (Betts, 1998; Miller & Husman, 1999; Maguire, 2005). Factors identified by faculty as being extrinsically motivating include professional recognition, stipends, reduced course/workload, institutional time off, and awards (Betts, 1998; Wolcott & Betts, 1999; Parker, 2003).

Why do faculty leave their positions? As previously stated, national data is unavailable on online faculty attrition and the reasons why faculty leave their positions. Furthermore, Amey (2003) reports, "Data on faculty are often not uniformly collected by the nation's colleges and universities" (p. 24). According to a 2004 study conducted at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in the School of Medicine, the most frequently cited reasons for faculty leaving included lack of opportunity for career advancement, low salaries, poor faculty development and mentoring, and poor departmental leadership (Cropsey, Barrett, Klein, & Hampton, 2004). In a presentation by Allred and Wegner (2004) at the University of North Carolina, they identified the top three reasons as to why faculty leave as better salary, better benefits, and more faculty support. While these types of reports shed light on faculty attrition, they do not delineate between full-time and part-time faculty or faculty who teach in on-campus or online programs.

While technologies continue to advance and online enrollments increase, it is the faculty who play a key role in the development, implementation, and sustainability of online programs (Betts, 1998; Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, & Marx, 1999; Willis, 1994; Wilson, 1998; McKenzie, Mims, Bennett, & Waugh, 2000). Therefore, administrators need to identify strategies to engage, motivate, and support faculty who teach online courses.

OHT Training and Support Concept

In an effort to proactively engage, connect, and retain online faculty, the OHT training and support conceptual framework was developed and implemented within Drexel University's MSHE Program. As previously noted, this personalized approach to online education has resulted in continued program growth, financial sustainability, high retention rates for students and faculty, high levels of satisfaction among students and faculty, and national recognition for best practices in online education.

The conceptual framework for OHT training and support brings together and builds upon five areas of research including:

- I. Faculty Engagement
(Hagner, 2001; BlessingWhite, Inc., 2008; Flände, 2008)
- II. Community Development
(Palloff & Pratt, 1999; McElrath & McDowell, 2008);
- III. Personalized Communication
(Faharani, 2003; Mehrabian, 1971; Kruger, Epley, Parker & Ng, 2003);
- IV. Faculty Development
(Bower, 2001; Puziffero-Schnitzer, 2005; Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Layne, Froyd, Simpson, Caso & Merton, 2004; Elkind, 2008)
- V. Data Driven Decision-Making
(Cranton & Legge, 1978; Scriven, 1967).

Figure 1 illustrates the interconnection between the five areas of research that support the OHT concept. While each area of research independently contributes to the overall faculty experience, it is when all five areas are strategically integrated into faculty training and support that they fully sustain the conceptual underpinnings of OHT.

Figure 1. OHT Training and Support Concept



An overview is provided to further describe the five areas of research that support the OHT training and support concept. Additionally, examples are provided to illustrate how each area of research is integrated into OHT to support the conceptual framework.

I. Faculty Engagement and OHT Strategies

Research on faculty engagement is limited. According to Alan Saks, a University of Toronto professor who studies engagement, "When you do a search on the Internet of employee engagement, you get 2 million hits, but there's only a handful of articles in the academic literature. That kind of tells you something" (Flander, 2008, ¶4). Online searches to define faculty engagement or to find studies relating to faculty engagement bring up various links to conference presentations (Zeppos, 2008; Carnevale, Ting, Tunwall & Zajac, 2003) and institutional initiatives (Pennsylvania State University, 2008; University of Georgia, 2008; Michigan State University, 2008). However, there is limited published research on faculty engagement.

Dr. Paul Hagner, the former Associate Program Director of the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative – ELI (formally known as the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative – NLII) was a 2000 NLII Fellow. As a fellow, Dr. Hagner's research focused on faculty engagement and the increasing proliferation of technology in education. In a report entitled *Interesting Practices and Best Practices in Faculty Engagement and Support*, Dr. Hagner (2001) states:

Higher education administrators must understand the challenges presented to faculty by the revolutionary changes being made by the new learning and teaching technologies and by the pressures created by the new students entering the academy. Administrators must realize that faculty vary considerably in both their abilities and their attitudes toward the new technologies and that institutional-based attempts to engage the faculty must take these variations into account in order to be successful. (p. 2)

While Dr. Hagner's research as an NLII fellow provides critical insight into faculty engagement, the ELI website today indicates that faculty engagement is now an archived topic.

According to Morris (2008), "The interest in faculty engagement and how faculty spend their time is not new" (p. 68). However, faculty engagement needs to go beyond clocking the number of hours faculty spend teaching, conducting research, and engaging in scholarly activities. In the corporate sector, BlessingWhite, Inc. (2008) provides national and international data in *State of Employee Engagement 2008* showing strong links between employee engagement and employee retention, productivity, customer satisfaction, and job satisfaction. Additionally, research by Gallup shows that "employee engagement also leads to improved recruitment and retention of staff, reduced absenteeism, sickness and stress and a healthier, happier and more motivated workforce (Flande, 2008, ¶4). Therefore, research on faculty engagement within higher education, like the corporate sector, should examine factors linking faculty engagement to innovation, satisfaction, faculty retention, and student retention.

The OHT concept builds upon and extends the research of Hagner (2001), BlessingWhite, Inc. (2008), and Flande (2008) by asserting that faculty must be engaged strategically in online education through training and support to increase faculty involvement, support innovation, and proactively assist with faculty and student retention. Therefore, faculty engagement must begin with recruitment and orientation, then it must be sustained through community building and ongoing faculty development.

Included below are three examples of how faculty engagement is integrated into OHT training and support.

Orientation

Faculty engagement begins with the required MSHE faculty orientation. This orientation includes a series of virtual meetings (teleconferences, videoconferences, or web-based conferences) with (1) the MSHE Program Director, (2) MSHE Program staff, and (3) institutional support staff. It is critical that online faculty realize during the hiring and orientation process that they are part of a team and they will be supported through extensive online communities. Through the virtual meetings, newly hired faculty are provided with online guided tours of Drexel University, the School of Education, Blackboard (learning management system), and the Higher Education Resource Portal. MSHE Program staff and institutional staff provide descriptive overviews of their positions and how they support faculty and the students.

Policies and Guidelines

MSHE policies and guidelines for faculty engagement were collaboratively developed and agreed upon by the MSHE faculty in fall 2006/07. The MSHE policies and guidelines established programmatic standards and expectations for (a) communicating with students, faculty, and staff (synchronous and asynchronous); (b) personalizing the educational experience for students; (c) engaging students in and outside of the classroom; (d) connecting students to Drexel University; (e) incorporating work-integrated learning into graded assignments; (f) integrating OHT instruction and programming strategies into all courses; and (g) establishing consistency in grading and evaluations. The MSHE policies and guidelines have been incorporated throughout the entire MSHE Program by the Director, academic advisors, support staff, and faculty. The policies and guidelines are reviewed annually. Recommendations for changes are discussed and agreed upon by the Program Director and faculty.

Shadowing Process

MSHE attrition data collected over the past three years indicates that faculty are more likely to leave or are more likely not to be rehired if they are disengaged and not connected to the MSHE Program. Therefore, there is particular emphasis on faculty engagement and developing a personal connection to Drexel University even prior to teaching online. All newly hired faculty are paired with an experienced MSHE faculty member the quarter before they begin teaching online. The newly hired faculty are enrolled in an actual course as a teaching assistant taught by the experienced instructor so they are able to shadow the instructor by viewing online classroom engagement through announcements, discussion boards, live classrooms, etc. Experienced faculty set up times during the quarter to discuss their teaching style and the strategies they incorporate into the online classroom to meet the standards and expectations outlined in the MSHE policies and guidelines.

II. Community Development and OHT Strategies

The OHT concept asserts that community development is critical to faculty engagement, connectivity to the institution, and retention in online education. Therefore, administrators need to develop strategies that promote and support academic and social community development for online faculty. When faculty are hired to work on-campus, they typically participate in required seminars/meetings that include a new employee orientation and faculty/employee training. Since on-campus faculty have office space and teach courses on-campus, there is a natural integration into the campus community. However, in the online environment, community development must be strategically integrated into training and support so that faculty who do not physically come to campus have an opportunity to meet and connect with other faculty, support staff, academic advisors, and administrators. As technology continues to redefine the educational environment, higher education must begin to reexamine and redefine community. According to Palloff and Pratt (1999):

It is really up to those of us involved with the use of technology in education to redefine community, for we truly believe we are addressing issues here that are primal and essential to the existence of electronic communication in the educational arena. (p. 23)

Research by McElrath and McDowell (2008) indicates that “community building in distance education is important to a successful learning experience because it alleviates feelings of isolation for both students and faculty members” (p. 117). Therefore, administrators must design and support meaningful opportunities for faculty to interact with others in a supportive and inclusive environment.

Building upon and extending the research of Palloff and Pratt (1999) and McElrath and McDowell (2008), the OHT concept purports that online faculty need to be integrated into the campus community early and provided with opportunities to connect with other faculty, program staff, institutional support staff, and administrators. Furthermore, the OHT concept purports that faculty should be provided with opportunities to engage in academic and social communities throughout their employment to create a sense of inclusion. These diverse communities increase online faculty involvement and connectivity which can increase engagement, productivity, job satisfaction, and retention.

Included below are three examples of how community development is integrated into OHT training and support.

Virtual Teas

Throughout the year, the MSHE Programs hosts virtual teas in Horizon Wimba Live Classroom and in Second Life. The virtual teas are designed to support and extend community development through discussions on current/emerging higher education issues as well as introducing student support services

specialists to faculty and students. Typically two or more classes are invited to a virtual tea. First, faculty and students are sent an email invitation to attend the virtual tea. Then, faculty and students are sent a signed invitation in the mail with a sachet of tea so they can join the virtual tea. The virtual teas provide an informal opportunity for faculty and students to interact in a relaxed environment that supports learning, engagement, and community development. Faculty have the opportunity to personally meet and connect with other faculty and their students. Faculty are also able to personally meet online student support specialists who can assist them or their students with new technologies, library resources, writing, career development, etc.

Online and On-Campus Events

To connect faculty to the Drexel University campus and provide opportunities for community development, faculty are invited by the MSHE Program Director several times during the year to participate in campus events. These events are offered physically on campus in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania or online through streaming video. For example, in fall 2007, faculty were invited to watch the United States Democratic debate held on Drexel University's campus through streaming video. In spring 2008, faculty were invited to attend physically or electronically an educational technology conference held on-campus. Each June, faculty are invited to come to campus for Drexel University's graduation ceremony. Faculty are also sent an electronic link to watch Drexel University's graduation through streaming video to support graduating students.

Higher Education Resource Portal

The MSHE Program has developed a Higher Education (HE) Resource Portal that serves as a hub for all communication between faculty and students. The HE Resource Portal posts weekly announcements as well as provides links to the academic calendar, learning resources, job postings, alumni interviews, MSHE photos, biographies posted by students, and discussion boards. Additionally, an MSHE newsletter is posted and archived in the HE Resource Portal after being sent out to all faculty and students each quarter. The newsletter features articles, research, and highlights upcoming on-campus and online events. Faculty are encouraged to share information relating to their research, publications, conferences, keynote presentations, etc. that can be shared in the HE Resource Portal and newsletter.

III. Personalized Communication and OHT Strategies

Faculty play a critical role in student engagement, connectivity, and retention. As stated by Tinto (2006), "Frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and students has repeatedly been shown to be an independent predictor of student persistence" (p. 2). Additional research by Chickering and Gamson (1987) reveals that knowing faculty as well as faculty concern assist students get through challenging times and enhance students' intellectual commitment. Within the online environment, frequency and quality of contact can be challenging if it is not defined and outlined through policies and guidelines that establish expectations for faculty-to-student and staff-to-student communication. Therefore, training in the area of communication is particularly important for faculty and staff since there are inherent communication differences between face-to-face and online education.

Interaction in a face-to-face program is predominately based on verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors (Farahani, 2003). Conversely, in an online education program, communication is often primarily text oriented and augmented with pre-recorded presentations (e.g., video, PowerPoint, audio podcasts, etc.). Therefore, course development and instruction must incorporate strategies to engage and personalize the educational experience for the students. Faculty must be cognizant of the communication differences that exist between the on-campus and online environment. According to Mehrabian (1971), face-to-face communication is broken down into three categories: 55% is non-verbal, 38% is tone and 7% is words. Telephone communication is broken down into two categories: 86% is tone and 14% is words (International Customer Management Institute-ICMI, 2008; Lockwood, 2008). It is important that faculty understand and recognize that with online education, non-verbal communication and tone is limited and at times non-existent; therefore, they must acquire communication and instructional skills that support personalized human interaction for the online environment.

Kruger, Epley, Parker and Ng (2005) conducted research to examine communication and interpretation of tone in text emails. Their research indicated that participants who sent emails overestimated their ability to communicate by email and that participants who received emails overestimated their ability to interpret email. According to the results, participants who sent emails predicted about 78% of the time their partners would correctly interpret the tone. However, the data revealed that only 56% of the time the

receiver correctly interpreted the tone (Kruger et al., 2006). As further noted by Winerman, the receivers in the study “guessed that they had correctly interpreted the message’s tone 90% of the time” (2006, p. 16). Since email is a common form of correspondence in online education, ensuring the correct message or intended message is being sent is imperative.

The term “lost in translation” can be used to describe misinterpretation or communication breakdown between faculty and students (Betts, 2009). It should be noted that “lost in translation” can be a powerful factor in an online environment and even linked to student attrition. Data collected from by the MSHE Program during the first academic year revealed that 12% of the students who opted to leave based their decision on their experience with the online instructor (i.e., citing poor communication by the instructor). As a result, the MSHE Program has spent two years developing communication strategies and training for faculty to decrease miscommunication between faculty and students.

The OHT concept asserts that personalized communication creates a supportive, nurturing, and respectful working and learning environment. Moreover, the OHT concept stresses that all program staff, advisors, and faculty must be trained on how to effectively communicate online. Policies and guidelines must be developed to provide a foundation and framework that supports frequency and quality of personalized feedback using multiple modes of online communication (i.e., text email, voice email, text discussion boards, voice discussion boards, podcasts, text announcements, voice announcements, phone calls, etc.). Instituting high expectations for communication, particularly personalized communication, is essential to connecting faculty and students to Drexel University as well as retaining faculty and students.

Included below are three examples of how personalized communication is integrated into OHT training and support.

Using Names in All Correspondence

MSHE policies and guidelines reinforce the importance of making students feel they are truly individuals in the MSHE Program and not just a number or attached to a cohort. Similarly, the MSHE policies and guidelines support and reinforce the importance of making communication more personalized for faculty. Therefore, the MSHE Program Director and staff use first names or more formal salutations depending on faculty preference in all communication (e.g., text email, voice email, phone calls, fax, letters, etc.) with faculty. With general program correspondence, communication goes out to all faculty under one salutation. However, for individual faculty correspondence, personalized communication using names is stressed so the faculty member knows the message is specifically for her or him relating to a course, student(s), or a particular topic/issue in which she or he is involved.

Recognizing and Celebrating Accomplishments

Faculty are vital to MSHE Program sustainability and growth. Therefore, it is important that they feel professionally and personally connected to the Program. Throughout the year, MSHE recognizes and celebrates the accomplishments of the faculty. For professional celebrations such as when faculty receive awards, promotions, or transition to new positions, congratulatory emails are sent individually to the faculty member on behalf of the MSHE Program. Additionally, faculty are asked if they would like to share the news as a highlighted feature in the MSHE newsletter. For personal celebrations such as the birth or adoption of a child, faculty receive a celebratory card on behalf of the MSHE Program that is hand-signed by all of the on-campus MSHE staff. Faculty are also asked if they would like to share the news or photos in the Announcement section of the HE Resource Portal. This recognition and celebration of various accomplishments has been an effective way for faculty to build and extend their community engagement throughout their employment in the MSHE Program.

Communication Materials

While the majority of the MSHE faculty have served or are currently serving as senior administrators in higher education institutions, only one-third of the MSHE faculty had online teaching experience when hired to teach for the MSHE Program. Therefore, the MSHE Program developed communication materials that are incorporated into the faculty training and MSHE Policies and Guidelines to emphasize the importance of personalized communication to student engagement and retention. Additionally, since online courses can be text heavy, the faculty orientation was designed to include strategies for incorporating both text and voice communication into courses including announcements, emails, podcasts, discussion boards, and Horizon Wimba Live Classroom. With regard to grading, faculty are also provided with examples of how to grade/evaluate in an online environment by using a constructive three-

layered approach. This constructive three-layered approach provides students with (1) positive comments on overall aspects of the document, (2) constructive criticism citing specific areas that need modification, and (3) summative constructive comments that provide recommendations for the document and/or upcoming assignments. The personalized comments on each student's assignment are intended to (a) engage students in the learning and evaluation process, (b) identify areas that need improvement, (c) motivate students to utilize the feedback; and (d) leave little chance for possible misinterpretation by students.

IV. Faculty Development and OHT Strategies

As online student enrollment continues to increase nationally, there will be growing demand for faculty to teach in online programs. According to Bower, (2001), increasingly college administrators are putting pressure on faculty to participate in distance learning. However, "most faculty have not responded as quickly and enthusiastically as administrators would like" (Bower, 2001, ¶2). Therefore, many institutions, including community colleges, mid-sized universities, and for-profit institutions, now rely on adjuncts (Carnevale, 2004, p. A31).

Nationally, adjuncts teach 30% to 50% of all credit courses and represent approximately 60% of all faculty at community colleges (Puzziferro-Schnitzer, 2005; Gappa & Leslie, 1993). For example, at institutions such as Florida Community College at Jacksonville (FCCJ), which enrolls more than 35,000 distance learners annually, "about 80% of all online course offerings are taught by virtual adjuncts" (Puzziferro-Schnitzer, 2005, ¶2). Clearly, part-time faculty are a great asset to an institution and online programs. As described by a program chair in *The Invisible Faculty: Improving the Status of Part-timers in Higher Education* (1993), "We are not using part-timers as a contingency faculty for emergencies. We are using part-timers to teach what they know well. [Teaching] quality depends on matching teaching assignment to qualifications" (Gappa & Leslie, 1993, p. 135).

Hiring faculty who have been formally trained in teaching can be challenging. As indicated by Layne, Froyd, Simpson, Caso, and Merton (2004),

Unlike most K-12 teaching professionals, faculty members in higher education typically have no formal preparation for the teaching portion of their professional responsibilities (exceptions include campuses that offer "college teaching" courses, Preparing Future Faculty {<http://www.preparing-faculty.org>} activities or other graduate student teaching preparation). As a result, faculty members are likely to teach as they were taught [1]. (p. S1C-15)

Similar to on-campus programs, lack of formal teaching preparation and training is prevalent in online education. According to research conducted by Elkind (2008), faculty training is often not required by nursing higher education institutions in the United States. In a study that included 1,427 nursing faculty respondents representing all regions of the United States, Elkind (2008) reported that only 18% of the faculty respondents stated that their school required training of their faculty. Survey results showed that less than half of the faculty (44%) reported receiving 1-8 hours of training prior to teaching their first course. Over one-third (35%) of the faculty reported receiving 0 hours of training prior to teaching their first online course. Additionally, 65% of the faculty reported that their school required faculty to have just basic computer skills to teach an online course.

Building upon and extending the research of Bower (2001), Puzziferro-Schnitzer (2005), Gappa and Leslie (1993), Layne et al. (2004), and Elkind (2008), the OHT concept asserts that faculty must be trained to teach and effectively communicate in an online environment before instructing online courses. Required training and ongoing faculty development provides faculty with opportunities to acquire new skills as well as reinforce any prior instructional training. With increasing numbers of faculty teaching in online programs, it is critical that programs design and implement instructional standards and guidelines as well as provide an orientation and ongoing faculty development.

Included below are three examples of how faculty development is integrated into OHT instruction and programming.

Mentoring

When MSHE faculty are hired, they are (1) required to participate in an orientation, (2) assigned to shadow an online course with a experienced faculty member prior to teaching, and (3) assigned a mentor for their first quarter of teaching with the option of continuing the online mentoring relationship. In many cases, the experienced MSHE instructor who works with the newly hired faculty member in the shadowing capacity also serves as the mentor for the first quarter. However, depending upon the quarter, the new

faculty may not have the opportunity to shadow the course in which they will be teaching. Therefore, they are placed in a course with another instructor who has worked previously with new faculty in a shadowing capacity. One month before new faculty teach their first quarter, they are assigned a mentor who will assist them in preparing for their upcoming course. During this time the mentors carefully review with the new faculty the syllabus, graded assignments, discussion boards, gradebook, Wimba Live Classroom sessions, and the overall format of the course. This provides new faculty with a comprehensive understanding of what is expected and what to expect during the 10-week quarter. Additionally, the mentor is enrolled in the new faculty member's course as a teaching assistant during his or her first quarter to provide guidance or assistance over the 10-weeks. The mentor is available via phone, email, and videoconferencing to answer questions and discuss strategies for engaging students in the online classroom over the quarter.

Ongoing Professional Development

Throughout the year, MSHE faculty are invited to attend ongoing faculty development sessions. Drexel University's School of Education and Goodwin College for Professional Studies collaboratively offer on-campus and online training for faculty on topics such as course development, new technologies, and instructional strategies. Additionally, the Office of Information Resources & Technology (IRT) offers extensive on-campus and online professional development sessions for faculty as well as annually hosts a two-day Institute on Innovation, a Faculty Technology Showcase, and the e-Learning 2.0 Conference. Faculty development sessions and events are often archived so faculty who were unable to attend the sessions have access to the training.

Research and Conferences

Many MSHE faculty teach particular courses several times during the year. These faculty work closely with the MSHE Program Director and Customized Learning Solutions Office to develop innovative strategies to maximize the online educational experience through annual course updates. Faculty are encouraged to conduct research on instructional strategies and student engagement. Additionally, faculty are encouraged to present and co-present research from their courses at national and international conferences. To date, MSHE faculty have presented at several national conferences as well as in Singapore, Austria, and Australia. Faculty have also co-presented with MSHE students and MSHE alumni on collaborative research at national and international conferences.

V. Data Driven Decision-Making and OHT Strategies

Data driven decision-making is a critical for the long-term sustainability of online programs. While program growth is important, particularly with new programs, monitoring factors related to retention and attrition is even more important. Administrators need to be able to identify and monitor online program data involving (a) *why* faculty succeed/do not succeed; (b) *which* faculty succeed/do not succeed; and (c) *what* factors contribute to and support faculty succeeding/not succeeding. By proactively identifying factors relating to retention and attrition, Program Directors are able to develop policies, guidelines, and strategies to support faculty engagement, connectivity, and retention.

The OHT concept focuses on the importance of evaluation and need for data driven decision-making in higher education; therefore it builds upon research by Cranton and Legge (1978) and Scriven (1967). According to Cranton and Legge (1978), "evaluation can be discussed along two major dimensions: formative versus summative and internal versus external" (p. 464). Formative evaluation is conducted during a program to assist with development and improvement (Scriven, 1967). Summative evaluation is conducted at the end of a program to measure effectiveness and value (Scriven, 1967). As noted by Cranton and Legge (1978), "it is often the case that formative evaluations are internal and summative evaluations are external; however, this division is by no means necessary" (p. 465). Typically, formative internal evaluations are conducted by faculty involved in the program whereas summative external evaluations are conducted by employees outside of the program and tend to be for the purpose of accountability (Cranton and Legge, 1978).

Data driven decision-making has and continues to serve as a cornerstone in the development and continuous quality improvement of the MSHE Program. Data driven decision-making is not new to higher education. It provides critical institutional information to administrators. According to Microsoft (2004), "With effective data driven decision making capabilities, higher education administrators and staff can more accurately identify trends, pinpoint areas that need improvement, engage in scenario-based planning and discuss fact-based decision making options and likely outcomes" (p. 1). Therefore, the OHT

concept asserts that data driven decision-making must be incorporated into programming to support continuous quality improvement, innovation, and retention of faculty and students.

Included below are three examples of how data driven decision-making is integrated into OHT training and support.

MSHE Faculty Survey

The MSHE Faculty Survey is conducted at the end of the summer quarter every two years to provide critical benchmarking data relating to faculty satisfaction, professional development, support, and the overall faculty experience. While the core of the survey is consistent, a portion of the survey is modified to collect data on new OHT initiatives or ideas that have been or will be incorporated into training and support. The data and results are used for continuous quality improvement as well as for incorporating into the faculty orientation, faculty development, and MSHE policies and guidelines as needed.

Evaluations

Each quarter faculty are provided with the results of their course evaluations. The evaluations provide feedback on student satisfaction, rigor of the course, support and feedback, and teaching method. Quarterly evaluations are also reviewed by the MSHE Program Director to identify areas for future faculty development. It should be noted that MSHE course evaluations were outsourced from fall 2005/06 to spring 2007/08. During this time course evaluations were modified several times providing distinct challenges for benchmarking. In 2007/08, three of the four quarters had different course evaluations which provided very limited comparative data. However, course evaluations were brought in house to the School of Education in June 2008. The School of Education has been working with faculty to develop course evaluations that provide more detailed feedback and improve the current and universal method of analyzing evaluative data.

Continuous Quality Improvement and Innovation

The MSHE Program works closely with Drexel University's Office of Regulatory Research Compliance throughout the academic year to conduct quantitative and qualitative research relating to continuous quality improvement as well as faculty satisfaction with new instructional strategies and/or new technologies. Several studies are conducted annually with select courses relating to the implementation of new instructional strategies and use of new technologies. At the end of the courses, faculty are interviewed about their experience and students complete electronic surveys regarding their experience. Based on the collected feedback, the instructional strategies and/or new technology may or may not be implemented on a larger scale or across the entire program. Past studies have shown this mixed methods approach to be very important and cost effective.

Results of OHT Instruction and Programming

Data collected from the MSHE Program over the past two years supports the value of OHT and the ongoing development of this evolving concept for faculty. Descriptive data and feedback derived from faculty and students highlight the critical role of OHT engagement, connectivity, and retention in the MSHE Program. Data and feedback are derived from (a) 2008 MSHE Faculty Survey; (b) 2008 Annual MSHE Student Survey; and (c) comments shared by online students over the past three years highlighting the impact of the OHT concept on their educational experience.

It should be noted that online and on-campus program comparative data relating to OHT training and support is unavailable. The OHT training and support concept for faculty was implemented in fall 2006/07 to support the online MSHE Program which did not and still does not exist as an on-campus program. Moreover, the first MSHE faculty survey was distributed in summer 2007/08 so the data is limited at this point to the first study.

2008 MSHE Faculty Survey

The OHT conceptual framework for training and support was incorporated into the MSHE Program in fall 2006/07 to increase faculty engagement, connectivity, and retention. It was decided upon implementation of the OHT concept that the MSHE faculty would be surveyed every two years to collect comparative data relating to faculty engagement, satisfaction, professional development, support, and their overall experience.

In September 2008, the first 2008 MSHE Faculty Survey was sent to 26 faculty who had been contracted to teach for the MSHE Program between Academic Year (AY) 2006/07 and AY 2007/08. Over two-thirds of faculty (N=16) responded representing a 67% response rate.

Results of the survey show that the majority of the MSHE faculty (71%) had never taught an online course prior to being contracted by the MSHE Program. Of the 29% who had previously taught online, half (50%) had not received any prior training for teaching online. Furthermore, only 38% of the faculty stated they had ever taken an online course.

The results of the 2008 MSHE Faculty Survey revealed that MSHE faculty feel highly connected to the MSHE support staff and students in their courses (see Table 1). Additionally, the collected faculty data and feedback support the review of literature revealing that MSHE faculty decided to teach online in the MSHE Program primarily because of intrinsic factors such as the opportunity to share professional experience, the opportunity to use new technologies, wanting to develop future leaders, and the opportunity to be actively involved in their field. Extrinsic factors identified by MSHE faculty for teaching online included flexibility in teaching schedule, supplemental income, and support from the MSHE program (see Table 2).

Table 1. Question: As an online faculty member in the MSHE Program how connected do you feel to the following constituent groups?

	Connected	Very connected	Total
MSHE Support Staff (Program Director, Academic Advisor, etc.)	57%	36%	93%
Students in your courses	50%	36%	86%
Drexel University	36%	7%	43%
Other MSHE faculty	29%	7%	35%
School of Education	29%	7%	36%

Likert scale: Very connected, Connected, Neutral, Disconnected, Very Disconnected

Table 2. Question: Why did you decide to teach in the MSHE Program? Please list the top 3 reasons.

Strong opportunity to develop new and innovative course. Appearance of strong support for faculty development. Availability of appropriate tools for online teaching and learning.
Opportunity to teach in a time and distance independent/flexible environment. Understand and utilize today's technological delivery methods. Be engaged and active in my field of study.
Had relevant background and experience in subject matter. It is my career goal to regularly teach in addition to my other job responsibilities. Reputation of the program was excellent.
Ph.D. in higher education field. Wanting to develop future leaders and managers in higher education. Supplement my income.
Great program. Support from the staff. Opportunity to use exciting new technologies.
Employee at Drexel and want to support program. Great professional opportunity regarding learning new teaching delivery system. Great professional opportunity regarding subject matter.
I just retired and have the time. I wanted to share my experience. I worked with a program as the CFO at another institution and looked forward to actually doing an online course.
Professional challenge, new, and innovative research supported.

Faculty were asked to rate their professional skills prior to teaching in the MSHE Program and then their current skills since teaching in the MSHE Program. The data revealed that shadowing, mentoring, and

training can significantly increase online skills. Faculty self-reported skill levels increased dramatically showing increases from 29% to 79% (see Table 3).

Table 3. Prior to teaching in the MSHE Program, how would you rate your previous skills in the following areas? and, Since teaching in the MSHE Program, how would you rate your current skills in the following areas?

		NA	Very weak	Weak	Moderate	Strong	Very Strong	Strong & Very Strong
Teaching Online	Previous skills	14%	22%	1%	36%	14%	0%	14%
	Current skills	0%	0%	0%	7%	86%	7%	93% (+79%)
Using Blackboard	Previous skills	14%	21.5%	21.5%	21.5%	21.5%	0%	21.5%
	Current skills	0%	0%	0%	7%	72%	21%	93% (+72%)
Oral communication (voice announcements, audio email, etc.)	Previous skills	21%	14%	14%	30%	21%	0%	21%
	Current skills	0%	0%	0%	14%	79%	7%	86% (+65%)
Text communication (voice announcements, voice email, etc.)	Previous skills	7%	7%	7%	21%	29%	29%	48%
	Current skills	0%	0%	0%	0%	43%	57%	100% (+52%)
Developing Horizon Wimba Classroom presentations	Previous skills	36%	21%	29%	7%	7%	0%	7%
	Current skills	7%	0%	0%	43%	43%	7%	50% (+43%)
Delivering Horizon Wimba Classroom presentations	Previous skills	36%	21.5%	21.5%	14%	7%	0%	7%
	Current skills	7%	0%	14%	43%	29%	7%	35% (+28%)
Using new technologies (e.g., Wimba Classroom, Camtasia, Impactica, etc.)	Previous skills	21%	29%	7%	43%	0%	0%	0%
	Current skills	7%	0%	14%	29%	43%	7%	50% (+50)
Grading online assignments	Previous skills	7%	7%	0%	36%	43%	7%	50%
	Current skills	7%	0%	0%	14%	50%	29%	79% (+29%)

The majority of the MSHE faculty (93%) stated they would like to attend faculty development throughout the academic year. Of the faculty who said they would like to attend faculty development, 57% stated they would like to attend faculty development online while 7% stated they would like to attend on-campus and 29% stated they would like to attend faculty development on-campus and online. Over half of the faculty (60%) stated they would like to attend faculty development twice a year while there was a split between faculty who wanted to attend faculty development once a quarter (four times a year) (15%), once a year (15%), and three times a year (7%). As to the length of the faculty development, the majority of the faculty indicated they would like sessions to last 90 minutes (54%) or 60 minutes (31%). Less than one-fifth of the faculty (15%) indicated they would like faculty development sessions to last two hours.

All of the faculty stated they would recommend the MSHE Program to individuals seeking to advance their career in higher education (100%) and individuals seeking to transition into higher education (100%). Furthermore, 100% of the faculty stated they would recommend the MSHE Program to administrators seeking online teaching opportunities.

2008 MSHE Annual Student Survey

In June 2008, the MSHE annual student survey was sent to 144 students enrolled in the MSHE Program in spring quarter 2008. Over half of the students (N=75) responded representing a 52% response rate. The purpose of the annual survey is to collect student data relating to student engagement, retention, academics, satisfaction, and professional development.

The results of the 2008 survey revealed that MSHE students feel connected to the MSHE faculty and students in their cohort (see Table 4). The data also reveals that online activities that are integrated into the courses through assignments and engage students with faculty and other students are very important for connecting students to the MSHE Program. The survey results reveal that weekly discussion boards, group assignments, and Horizon Wimba Live lectures connect students much more to the MSHE Program than text and audio chat rooms that are not incorporated into the courses but available in all MSHE courses (see Table 5).

Personalized text and voice communication and feedback are important to connecting students to the MSHE Program. The majority of students indicated that text comments on graded assignments made them feel highly connected to the MSHE Program. Furthermore, the data revealed that weekly discussion boards, announcements, emails, and "live" classroom lectures connect students more to the MSHE Program than pre-recorded video lectures or pre-recorded voiceover PPT presentations (see Table 6).

The majority of students (96%) stated they would recommend the MSHE Program to individuals seeking to advance their career in higher education. Additionally, 92% stated they would recommend the MSHE Program to individuals seeking to transition into higher education. Approximately two-thirds of the students (62%) stated they planned to become active alumni upon graduation from Drexel University.

Table 4. Question: As an online student in the MSHE Program how connected do you feel to the following constituent groups?

	Connected	Very connected	Total
Faculty and adjunct faculty	51%	18%	69%
Your cohort	55%	12%	67%
School of Education	35%	11 %	46%
Drexel University	32%	10%	42%
MSHE students outside of your cohort	12%	1%	13%

Likert scale: Very connected, Connected, Neutral, Disconnected, Very Disconnected

Table 5. Question: As an online student how engaged are you with the following course activities?

	Engaged	Very engaged	Total
Weekly Discussion Boards	39%	53%	92%
Group Assignments	26%	62%	88%
Horizon Wimba Live Classroom lectures offered by faculty	42%	45%	87%
Voice Chat Rooms	24%	19%	43%
Text Chat Rooms	21%	12%	33%

Likert scale: Very engaged, Engaged, Neutral, Disengaged, Very Disengaged

Table 6. Question: Rate the level to which each educational activity makes you feel connected as a student to the MSHE Program.

	Connected	Very connected	Total
Text comments on graded assignments	41%	53%	94%
Weekly Discussion Boards (text)	45%	47%	92%
Text announcements	46%	43%	89%
Text email	52%	36%	88%
Voice announcements	45%	39%	84%
Live Classroom lectures presented by faculty	35%	49%	84%
Live Classroom lectures presented by individual students and groups for graded assignments	40%	43%	83%
Voice comments on graded assignments	30%	48%	78%
Voice email	34%	42%	76%
Weekly Discussion Boards (Voice)	33%	43%	76%
Video lectures by faculty	30%	27%	57%
Voiceover PPT/Camtasia presentations by faculty	34%	23%	57%

Likert scale: Very connected, Connected, Neutral, Not very connected, Not connected at all

Comments Shared by MSHE Students

Comments shared by MSHE students through emails with faculty as they move through the two-year master's degree program provide a personal perspective on how OHT training and support connects faculty to students. Included below are comments from student emails sent to the Founding MSHE Program Director/current MSHE professor between fall 2005/06 and summer 2008/09. These comments highlight the value of personalizing the online educational experience for students through OHT.

"Your support over the past two years has been unlike anything I have ever known. Although there have been some tough and frustrating moments throughout the program you have always been so

encouraging that I have been able to work through them.”

“You have been a wonderful professor (knowledge, techniques, understanding of students, embracement of different perspective and I can go on and on) and you don’t know how much you have done for me with your feedback and positive attitude.”

“I really appreciate your response to my Key Learning Points and the contact. It means a lot to know that you recognize something in me that can contribute to the higher education world. As the days proceed and I continue to be challenged by the course material my interest in and commitment to becoming a contributor in the field grows. Thanks again for being a true teacher.”

“Thank you so much for the kind words and feedback you continue to provide. Your attentiveness and support have relieved a lot of the anxiety and worry I felt about an online format at the beginning of the quarter. I am truly enjoying every aspect of the program thus far.”

“It has been an absolute pleasure to be in your class this semester. You take the time to explain everything thoroughly. I think you are very patient and understanding for those first year students and I wanted to commend you on that. Your subject is difficult, you did a great job presenting it and making it interesting. I enjoyed when you incorporated ‘real’ experiences or posted an audio or video that applied to our subject. I also appreciated that you took the time to comment on our postings and work. I think this really allows us to connect with you. I just thought I would let you know how much I have enjoyed this term.”

“This program has been one of the most significant events of my life. Thank you so much for your kind comments!! And all of your help, of course. Thank you again for all of your help and kind words.”

Conclusion

Unlike the corporate sector that conducts ongoing research relating to employee engagement, there is limited data on faculty engagement in higher education. Additionally, there is limited data and research on faculty development in online education. Recognizing that faculty are vital to online program development and sustainability, the MSHE Program designed and implemented the OHT training and support conceptual framework to increase faculty engagement, connectivity, and retention. Research collected over the past two years in the MSHE Program at Drexel University indicates that OHT positively affects faculty engagement, connectivity, and retention.

In reviewing the literature and the data provided through the MSHE Faculty Survey, it is clear that faculty engagement and faculty development are areas that need increased institutional and national attention. It is important that faculty are set up for success as online instructors by providing them with the necessary training and support. It is also important to provide faculty with program-based policies and guidelines relating to online communication, frequency of postings, grading, email response times, etc.

Faculty retention is critical to online program growth and sustainability. Therefore, administrators need to develop strategies to engage and connect full-time and part-time faculty to an institution beyond simply teaching online courses. Also, for online students who do not come to campus, faculty often are the face of the institution and play an integral role in student engagement and retention. Consequently, it is important that faculty have the training and support needed to instruct their online course as well as represent the institution nationally and internationally.

Recommendations

The OHT training and support conceptual framework for faculty can be integrated into online and blended/hybrid programs. However, the implementation of the OHT concept must be supported by faculty policies and guidelines. To connect faculty to an online program, faculty must become engaged during the recruitment and hiring process and increasingly engaged through orientation, shadowing, mentoring, and ongoing faculty development. Moreover, data driven decision-making is essential for the sustainability of the OHT training and support. Data and feedback on OHT strategies must be collected as part of a continuous quality improvement process using evaluations and benchmarking studies to monitor the affects on OHT on faculty engagement, connectivity, and retention.

Continued research and comparative research with on-campus and blended/hybrid programs is recommended to expand the OHT conceptual framework for faculty. Additionally, more national research is needed in the areas of faculty engagement and faculty development for on-campus, blended/hybrid, and online programs. As technology becomes increasingly ubiquitous and online enrollments continue to grow nationally, there will be greater demand for online full-time and part-time faculty.

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