One question that continues to linger in the minds of academic and corporate decision makers around the world is the question of quality in online education. In an ongoing mission to study the state of online education in America, The Sloan Consortium has conducted three national surveys since 2003. The goal of the surveys and study were aimed at answering some of the key questions about the nature and extent of online education, including “how does the quality of online education compare to that of the traditional face-to-face education system?”

In the first report in 2003, “Sizing the Opportunity: The Quality and Extent of Online Education in the United States, 2002 and 2003” survey results indicated that academic leaders believe that learning outcomes for online education are equal or superior to those of face-to-face instruction. In the second annual study summarized in the report, “Entering the Mainstream: The Quality and Extent of Online Education in the United States, 2003 and 2004” it was determined that “schools that offer online courses believe that their online students are at least as satisfied as those taking their face-to-face offerings” and that “schools continue to believe that online education is just as good as being there” (Sloan Consortium, 2004).

The most recent national survey and report by the Sloan Consortium titled, “Growing By Degrees: Online Education in the United States, 2005” indicates that the quality issue had been resolved and the survey focused on other questions such as whether online education is a major part of schools long term strategies. The report mentions that “previous studies have shown that Chief Academic Officers believe, in general, that online courses are of equal quality to face-to-face and that students are as satisfied with online as with face-to-face courses. They have also expressed reservations about their faculty’s acceptance of online education” (Sloan Consortium, 2005).

As the Sloan Consortium research and other studies confirm, there is general consensus that the quality of online courses is equal to, or better than the quality in face-to-face courses. However, as referenced in the 2005 Sloan Consortium report, the perception that online courses are of lower quality persists even in the face of this factual evidence to the contrary. The question of quality in online courses is something that continues to be a concern and one that must continue to be addressed.

At Bowling Green State University, the coordination and leadership in the development of online courses and programs is managed by the IDEAL (Interactive Distance Education for All Learners) Office. When a course or program is planned for online delivery, there is an initial consultation with the IDEAL Office after which IDEAL staff help create an action plan to assist with all aspects of the development process from design through implementation.

During the development phase, part of the role of IDEAL is to act as a quality control mechanism for the university. Since quality of instruction is an integral factor to the quality and success of a program, IDEAL devotes considerable attention to faculty development in the online classroom. Faculty who are experienced in delivering content in their face-to-face classrooms sometimes have little or no experience
teaching online. There is still some skepticism and preconceived views that quality instruction cannot be replicated in an online environment.

Frequently asked questions include:

- How can faculty and students communicate effectively…
- How can students learn to collaborate in group projects…
- How can student participation be evaluated…
- How can a course be interactive and engaging…
- How can a course be a quality course…

when the faculty and students never meet face to face?

“Distance Learning 101: An Online Faculty Training Seminar” is designed as a comprehensive introduction for faculty who will be teaching in an online environment. The seminar is highly interactive and is taught by a member of the IDEAL staff. Blackboard, the course management system at BGSU, is used to deliver the content which consists of readings, video, web links, and Flash presentations. Assessments and projects are assigned throughout the duration of the training, and extensive discussion participation is required.

The seminar addresses the questions posed above by covering both the technical and pedagogical aspects of teaching online and is unique because faculty experience first hand what it is like to be an online student as they are learning to develop and teach an online course. Learning outcomes are that upon completion of the seminar, faculty will know how to:

- Effectively design, develop, and teach an online course.
- Facilitate online communication and encourage student participation.
- Make effective use of information and media (video, audio, graphics, etc.) in an online environment.
- Manage online group projects and facilitate group discussions.
- Assess and grade online students.

The seminar length is 3 weeks and it takes approximately 12 hours per week to complete. Each week consists of four modules and a typical module may include viewing a Flash presentation and/or video, completing a reading assignment, viewing relevant websites, completing a practice classroom assignment, taking a quiz, and participating in discussions on the topics presented. A group project is assigned the second week and is to be completed by the third week, however, participants also continue to work on individual assignments during that time. A large portion of the course is dedicated to discussion as faculties are asked to reflect on course topics and their application in the online classroom.

The seminar itself can be used as a model for the development and implementation of faculty online courses. The course design as well as tools, links, and rubrics can be copied and modified for application in the faculty courses. Although originally designed for new online instructors, experienced instructors and instructional designers who have participated report that it generates new ideas and refreshes skills. The seminar runs several times throughout the academic year and summer with an average class size of 10-15 faculty.

Currently, nearly one hundred faculty have completed the online training seminar and the results have been overwhelmingly positive. Feedback includes:
• "This has been incredibly beneficial for me...I feel much more prepared to teach online than I did before taking the class."
• "Participating in this course helps me understand how students will react to this learning environment, which will make me a more effective online teacher."
• "I found this extremely valuable and will recommend it to colleagues."

Several faculty who had no experience in an online environment, and who were skeptical prior to the training have now become strong advocates and leaders for distance education at BGSU. In addition, many have commented that taking this seminar produced some carry-over effects in their face-to-face courses. The concepts and discussion in this seminar inspired several faculty to examine and assess their current face-to-face teaching practices and in some cases, apply new teaching strategies learned as well add online components to their in-class instruction.

References


Biographical Sketches

Connie Molnar is the Director of Distance Learning at Bowling Green State University. She provides leadership for distance education for the university, including the coordination of distance course and program development and faculty training. Ms. Molnar’s professional experience includes serving as the assistant director at BGSU’s Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology, managing a computer training center, working as a systems analyst at a fortune 500 company and six years in a university faculty position. Ms. Molnar has a Bachelors degree in Education, a Master of Music degree, and a Master of Science degree in Computer Science.

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