Impediments to Faculty Engaging in Web-based Instruction: Clarification of Governing Policies

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Abstract

An exploratory study was conducted with faculty and administrators at Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs) to determine the level of reported knowledge and experience with policies that govern Web-based instruction (WBI). Result indicated that faculty had little experience with the policies and many had not participated in policy development. Lack of communication of the policies was also reported to be a barrier to participation. Recommendations on policy information adoption and dissemination were made based on the findings of the study.

Purpose of the Study

Higher education is in continual transition and one cannot underestimate the influence of technology on everyday life of learners and educators. Web-based Instruction (WBI) is among the forces influencing higher learning and instruction and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have not been left out. However, while technology offers new options, there is also the danger of losing some of the important attributes of higher education. These attributes include the commitment to providing the less advantaged with an opportunity for education, education's tradition of addressing student and societal needs, and the emphasis on learning and scholarship. There is a technology and information gap that is evident in the Black community and this his gap has kept the poor, rural, and minority populations from participating and benefiting from the information technology revolution and this trend is inevitably carried on to the Black college environment (Hamilton, 2001).

While there are numerous studies examining older methods of distance education, few comprehensive empirical studies have provided evidence of the effectiveness of WBI in HBCUs. Little research has been conducted in the area of WBI focusing specifically on input from faculty. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influence faculty participation in WBI at HBCUs. This exploratory study was conducted to determine the factors that influence faculty participation in WBI at seven HBCUs, including determining the level of reported knowledge and experience with policies that govern WBI. In this mixed-design study, data used to investigate the research questions came from responses from one hundred and forty-nine faculty and administrators (deans and departments chairs) at seven public HBCUs that offer online curricula. An online questionnaire was designed to collect data using a four-point scale, open-ended items, and follow-up interviews.

Background

Lack of clarification of WBI policies is a barrier to participation for many faculty. These polices can be categorized into several areas: (1) Academic policies refer to quality, accreditation, grading, program evaluation, admissions, credentialing, mission compliance and curriculum review; (2) Fiscal, geographical, and governance policies cover fees, in-state and out-of-state relationships, consortia agreements, and contracts with collaborating agreements; (3) Faculty-related Web-based policies address compensation, workload, design and development, incentives, staff development, support, evaluation, and intellectual freedom issues; (4) Legal policies refer to intellectual property agreements, copyright, and faculty/student/institutional liability; (5) Student-related policies address support, access, advising, training, financial aid, assessment, access to resources, equipment requirements, and privacy; (6) Technical polices define reliability, connectivity, technical support, hardware/software access; and (7) Philosophical policies are developed to define a clear understanding of approach, faculty autonomy, organizational values, and missions, enhanced public access, organization, governance, partnerships, and financial support are all themes that should be addressed in the discussion on policy and Web-based instruction (Gellman-Danley, 1997, Hickman, 1999; Noble, 1998; Simonson, 2002).

Kinyanjui (1998) states that distance education is often criticized because governing policies are often not coordinated with provision of resources, development of supporting infrastructures, and training of users of distance education. He also indicates that distance education is introduced without adequate understanding of the organizational culture and context, and the political, physical, economic, social, and technological

environment. Kinyanjui further observes that distance education is sometimes introduced hastily or arbitrarily in a top-down manner. Inadvertently, decisions should be made as to whether a top-down or a bottom-up approach should be used to integrate technology. The top-down approach assumes that formulating goals, organizational structures, management approaches, implementing technological advancements should bring about change (Surry & Farquahr, 1997). On the other hand the bottom-up approach is one that should facilitate change from the point of view of middle-level administrators, faculty, and learners, who work directly with the technology (Fitz & Haplin, 1994).

Understanding the fundamental characteristics that shape HBCUs serves as a framework of analysis for equality and access to higher education. HBCUs are postsecondary academic institutions that were founded prior to 1964, and whose educational mission has historically been the education of Black Americans. Predominantly Black institutions of higher education are classified as non-HBCUs that serve a majority of Black students. Predominantly black colleges and universities are institutions that were not founded primarily for African Americans but have more than 50 percent black student enrollment. There are 103 HBCUs and over 50 predominantly Black colleges and universities located in twenty states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands (Brown & Davis, 2001). These institutions include accredited two- and four-year schools, and graduate and professional institutions. Forty-nine percent are public and fifty-one percent are private. and they generally face the same issues as HBCUs (Brown & Davis, 2001; Brown & Hendrickson, 1997; Evans, et al., 2000).

HBCUs encounter challenges pertaining to improving the technology infrastructure, training faculty for online teaching, and developing online content. These challenges are further complicated by the fact that HBCUs generally have fewer monetary resources, charge their learners less, and have to take their historical mission of cultivating a supportive atmosphere for their learners into account (Hamilton, 2001, Brown & Davis, 2001). The cost of technology is a barrier that has been an area of concern for some HBCUs, especially those who have limited financial resources. To address these issues, many institutions seek supplemental funding and many have formed consortia that create Web-based courses and programs Hamilton, 2001).

Design of the Study

This exploratory study was conducted using quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. Data used to investigate the research questions came from responses to an online questionnaire designed to collect quantitative data using a four-point scale. Open-ended questions were included at the end of each section and follow-up interviews were conducted with faculty and administrators via e-mail. Documents and official institution Web pages were also reviewed for addition information.

Institutions selected for participation in the study are all public four-year institutions located in the southern United States. The seven HBCUs were selected based on the following criteria. First, institutions that offer online curricula were selected. Second, all the HBCUs use Course Management Systems such as WebCT © and Blackboard © or have institution specific software for WBI. Third, they provide faculty support and development for WBI in various forms, such as workshops and seminars.

The participants in the study were faculty and administrators (deans and department chairs). E-mail with a link to the Website where the survey instrument was located was sent to 1125 faculty and administrators inviting them to respond to the survey. There were 152 (12.4%) valid responses with female participants accounting for 54% of the participants, while males accounted for 46% of the responses. Overall, 61% of the participants were Black or African American, 32.9% were White, 3.3% were Asian, and 1.3% were Native Hawaiians. Approximately 68% of the participants indicated their primary activity was teaching and 23% identified themselves as administrators. A majority of the participants (68%) were associate (32.2%) and assistant (31.6%) professors. Professors made up 21.7% of the total participants and instructors made up 10.5% of the responses. Four follow-up interviews were conducted with four administrators and faculty at participating institutions.

Findings of the Study

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected in this study. Participants responded to four questions about their levels of experience with polices that govern WBI at their institutions. They rated each of the questions using the following scale: (1) No Experience; (2) A Little Experience; (3) Some Experience; and (4) High Experience. The results are presented in Table 1. Out of 149 responses, 59.7% of the faculty indicated that they had some or high amount of knowledge about general WBI polices at their institutions. However, participants typically reported that they had not participated in the actual development of the policies, and only

6.7% indicted that their level of participation in policy development was high. One participant acknowledged familiarity with the policies at her institution and stated:

> I am somewhat familiar with policies regarding Web-based courses; however I have yet to participate in the development of any of these policies here. We are currently developing Web-based courses for our electronic classroom (this Fall). However, we are bounded by the University policies governing WBI.

A participant at a different university indicate he was also aware of the institutions WBI polices but stated that he lacked time to be more active in the policy development process. He noted that a Technology Committee had been active for several years but due to other commitments he was not part of the decision-making processes. Another participant who indicated she was aware of the policies at her institution emphasized that "to know the policies is not the same as participating in the development of the polices."

Looking at one specific area of WBI polices, 72% of the participants indicated that they had little or no knowledge of intellectual property rights policies at their institution and only 2.7% had high experience in helping develop these intellectual property policies. Participants indicated their institutions should have clear policies on intellectual property rights to encourage faculty to participate in WBI. One person expressed this concern as follows:

> WBI was covered in an agreement. With the destruction of the governing organization there is now a question about the bargained agreement and the whole issue of intellectual property rights at my University.

In addition to lack of experience with policies, participants indicated that their institutions did not communicate the policies clearly but that they would be willing to develop Web-based courses with clarification of the policies. One faculty stated:

> I have a reluctance to participate in WBI for various reasons. I am not sure of the intellectual property policies at all. I think there are some; however, no one has been able to clearly articulate them to me.

Several participants indicted that they had attended one or two seminars on intellectual property rights and were aware of guidelines. Another participant indicated that WBI was new at his university and that he was aware that the distance education department was in the process of developing policies in accordance with state guidelines.

Table 1 *Experience with and Knowledge of WBI Polices*

Experience with Policies	No Exp		A Little Exp		Some Exp		High Exp		N	SD	M	Mean Rank
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%				
Knowledge of general policies	26	17.4	34	22.8	73	49.0	16	10.7	150	.90	2.53	1
Knowledge of Intellectual Property Rights	49	32.7	37	24.7	54	36.0	10	6.7	151	.96	2.17	2
Participated in Policy formation	81	54.0	27	18.0	36	24.0	6	4.0	151	.94	1.79	3
Participated in Intellectual Property Rights Policy Formation	97	64.7	30	20.0	19	12.7	4	2.7	151	.82	1.54	4

Note: 1 = No Experience; 2 = A Little Experience; 3 = Some Experience; 4 = High Experience

The common threads of HBCUs discussed by Brown and Davis (2001) are social organization and Black cultural tradition which seeks to provide leadership for the Black community. HBCUs play a role in interpreting social, political, and economic dynamics and addressing overarching issues between the minority

and majority population groups. HBCUs also act as agents for specialized research, institutional training, and information dissemination for Black and other minority communities. Overall, faculty reported that they had little experience with general and intellectual property policies. Typically, they reported that they had not participated in either formation of general or intellectual rights policies. Lack of communication on the policies was also reported to be a barrier to participation in WBI by five participants.

Discussion

Faculty in this study generally reported that they had little experience and knowledge of WBI. Participants reported they had not taken part in the development of WBI policies, and many were not aware of efforts by their administration to communicate related information. Other participants indicated that while they were willing to participate in committees that addressed policy issues, they felt they had an obligation to attend to what they felt were far more pressing issues such as teaching, conducting research, publishing, and service. This lack of participation is contrary to recommendations by Czubaj (2001) who states that an area of particular significance is increasing the awareness and knowledge among faculty, staff, and students about educational technologies and methods that have the potential to enhance the outreach mission of the individual institutions.

Legal issues that included intellectual property rights and institutional, faculty, and student liability were an on-going concern with faculty. Unclear guidelines on intellectual property rights often serve as a barrier to participation in WBI for many faculty (Hill, 1997; West, 1999). Potential participants are apprehensive about developing coursework for the WBI environment until they have clear knowledge of who owns the material as it is often unclear as to who owns the rights to the instructional material.

With the exponential growth of the Internet and the Web, the challenge that remains is keeping the practices and guidelines current and accurate. While each HBCU has its own administrative approach, it is important for administrators and faculty to communicate with each other and to work together in policy development. Based on individual institutional missions, Czubaj (2001) suggests forming program evaluation advisory committees with representation from students, faculty, staff, and administration. Commitment should encompass academic affairs, information technology services, library services, and partnerships and liaisons who work with the programs.

Continuous development of leadership skills, development of innovative solutions to fulfill HBCU missions, serve students, and involvement of faculty in decision-making processes, are all important elements. Collins (2001) and Lape and Hart (1997) note that many tenets of educational technology integration are emerging thus the need for committed leadership in bringing educational technology into instruction. Hence, before institutional policies can be changed, each individual institution should determine what the administration knows about WBI and the importance that is placed on the policies.

To address policies for successful WBI integration, several approaches are recommended. First, policies should be integrated gradually and seamlessly to incorporate the concept of distant delivery of instruction. Second, learners should be defined by their enrollment in a course, not by whether they are distant or on campus. With the mission of many HBCUs being to provide a nurturing learning environment, designing a learner-friendly environment is important. Third, initially policies should be separate from existing policies. Ultimately, policies can be integrated to indicate that WBI is a regular component of instructional delivery, as faculty become more proficient with the technology.

When making recommendations for WBI policies, several questions should be addressed before faculty settle on developing and teaching Web-based courses. It is recommended that each HBCU respond to concerns, most of which where raised by participants in this study: Do faculty have portability rights to take the material with them when they leave? In the event that another faculty member teaches the course, does the developer receive compensation? Should copyright be in the name of the developer or the school? If these questions cannot be clearly answered, it is unlikely that faculty will be willing to participate in WBI.

Based on the above questions, the following is recommended: (1) Copyright ownership policies written to allow faculty to reasonably have latitude with their own work; (2) As with classroom-based courses, the extent that institutions have the authority to determine, suggest, or decide use of Web-based course material should be clearly addressed; (3) It is to the advantage of the HBCU and the faculty to define each participating member's ownership rights. Hence, all parties should know who owns the final product; (4) Compensation and workload, design and development incentives, support, and promotion and tenure should also be taken into account. When faculty have leverage with their work and they are part of the decision making process they will be more likely to take initiative and ownership of the Web-based course development process and end-product (Gellman-Danley, 1997).

The following recommendations are also made based on the concerns raised by participants regarding

the development and communication of WBI policies: (1) Building solid and diverse relationships across academic units to assist in policy issues; (2) Developing university-wide committees to review policies and communicates guidelines; (3) Publishing policies in institution documents, on relevant parts of the university Web site, and other visible locations in the college community; (4) Developing institutional expertise in policy issues thus developing collegiality and distribute appropriate training; and (5) Using the guidelines and policies to balance the interests of intellectual property rights of the faculty and institution.

Noblitt (1997) states that the key to collaborative decision-making, when incorporating technology into education is for both bottom-up and top-down administrators to ask the following questions when reviewing WBI guidelines: Are there mission-critical problems that are unresolved under the current practices? Do the problems affect a majority of the students? Does technology provide any real value educationally? Can the project be implemented with existing resources? Is technology a solution for these problems? If the answer is no, then perhaps technology is not the solution.

Conclusion

The area of integration of technology in education is a continuous effort that revolves around looking for factors and practices that can be applied to encourage faculty to integrate technology in their areas of teaching. Since the HBCUs selected for the study offered online curricula, this study focused on investigating the factors that influence faculty participation in WBI. Outcomes of this study indicated that faculty had little or no experience with Web-course policies and faculty were not actively involved in corresponding policy development.

The question of suitability of WBI for both their institutions and their learners is an area of concern for many. Is WBI policy formation an initiative of administrations or voluntary action on the part of the faculty? If it is voluntary, how much input from faculty was taken into account? Was WBI policy formation a top-down or bottom-up approach? When planning, implementing, and maintaining WBI, governing policies regarding the program must be carefully developed. Planning should include needs assessment, policy barriers, and evaluation. Because technology is constantly changing, the policies also require regular revision and updating. As technology continues to evolve, the policies governing WBI will become more complex and accumulative. Inadvertently, the policies will require continuous review to remain current and valid.

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