

Online Faculty Satisfaction
and
Quality Enhancement Initiatives

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine possible effects of an institution's quality enhancement initiatives on the job satisfaction of online faculty. Quality enhancement initiatives are a normal part of the accreditation process and faculty shoulder some of the responsibility for success of those initiatives. Therefore, it is imperative that university administration be concerned that the additional burden of any initiatives added to workload does not negatively affect the level of satisfaction experienced by faculty serving in the online environment. To increase the success of quality enhancement initiatives, it is imperative that faculty who teach using online modalities experience job satisfaction. This paper reviews the online academic environment, the faculty who teach online, quality enhancement initiatives, and job satisfaction of online faculty. The paper then provides methods that may be used by university administration to enhance job satisfaction.

Key Words: Faculty, satisfaction, online, quality enhancement initiatives, accreditation

Introduction

As part of his 14 standards to achieve business success, W. Edwards Deming, the father of quality management, proposed that an organization should work relentlessly to improve quality, and in the quality improvement process include everyone within the organization in order to accomplish successful transformation (Deming, 1982). Accreditation agencies have moved into an era of accountability and as a result adopted a model requiring quality enhancement initiatives that integrate the Deming model of continuous improvement (Nowicki, 2006). A review of university quality enhancement initiatives found that initiatives that affect online faculty run the gamut from enhancing student engagement to providing specific direction for online communication with students.

The growth of online degree programs and the resulting growth in faculty who teach online have brought new challenges to educational institutions. The number of faculty who have chosen to teach in the online environment, physically removed from colleagues and the university's campus has grown (McLean, 2006), and has fueled the success of online educational programs (Allen & Seaman, 2007). As universities pursue quality enhancement initiatives, it is important that faculty who assume some of the burden for those initiatives in the online environment remain satisfied with their work. There must be an effort by administration to ensure faculty satisfaction as, "The ultimate success or failure of the distance education enterprise is inextricably tied to the enthusiasm and continued support of the faculty" (Sherron, 1998, p. 44). Without that enthusiasm and support, the success of quality enhancement initiatives in which faculty are essential cannot be assured.

The Online Environment

The number of online academic programs and the number of students who enroll in online classes are growing, with approximately 56 percent of 2- and 4-year institutions in the United States offering courses via the distance format in the 2000-2001 academic year (Forrest, Cataldi, Fahimi, & Bradburn, 2005). In addition, "nearly twenty percent of all U.S. higher education students were taking at least one online course" in the fall of 2006 (Allen & Seaman, 2007, p. 1). The U.S. Department of Education recognizes (NCES 2002-155), "Many postsecondary education resources are being devoted to nontraditional delivery methods such as distance education" (p. 1). As resources are being committed to the delivery of online courses, institutions must focus continuous improvement efforts on this aspect of the organization and plan for inclusion of online faculty in order to work towards program improvement and organizational transformation.

Faculty in the Online Environment

Success in the online environment requires a focus on the teaching aspect of the professoriate. Teaching in the online classroom requires "...faculty to put efforts into the knowledge of the discipline..." (Boyer, 1990, p. 22). In most established online programs faculty are required to utilize official university content in each course. That content includes the textbook, syllabus and grading scale, specific assignments, tests and grading rubrics, and allows online faculty to focus on facilitation of student learning rather than preparation of course materials. Adjunct faculty hired to teach online courses are normally paid per course taught, and unlike requirements for salaried full-time faculty, universities as a rule do not require online adjunct faculty to participate in service to the university through committee membership or student advising. Thus, the engagement of online faculty in quality enhancement initiatives may be viewed as outside the requirements of teaching, and any participation in the initiative adds to the workload of the online faculty for which only a per-course wage is paid.

The focus of an online faculty member on student learning, along with not being physically located on campus is further complicated by the fact that most online faculty also hold other positions, with the average adjunct working at two institutions (Modarelli, 2006). A recent study of online faculty at one university found 59.5% of the responding faculty reported they held a full-time position [in addition to their online position at the university], "18.5% held additional part-time positions, and only 9.5% held no additional positions" (Satterlee, 2008, p. 100). The unique requirements of an online faculty member, their disconnect from the physical campus and colleagues, and that for a majority the online position is a secondary job means that interest and participation in quality enhancement initiatives may not be a high priority, and may even be very low priority if they are not experiencing job satisfaction.

Quality Enhancement Initiatives

Quality enhancement is a long-term, ongoing effort that measures institutional effectiveness. Quality enhancement initiatives are required by accrediting bodies, and in general are similar to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools statement:

The concept of quality enhancement presumes each member institution to be engaged in an ongoing program of improvement and able to demonstrate how well it fulfills its stated mission. Although evaluation of an institution's educational quality and its effectiveness in achieving its mission is a difficult

task requiring careful analysis and professional judgment, an institution is expected to document quality and effectiveness in all its major assets (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, p. 5).

Quality enhancement is closely associated with The Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence, which includes a focus on stakeholder outcomes (2009). The Baldrige Criteria assesses student and stakeholder culture in which online faculty are considered stakeholders who can lead to positive student culture.

The Education Criteria are designed to help provide organizations with an integrated approach to organizational performance management that results in:

- delivery of ever-improving value to students and stakeholders, contributing to education quality and organizational stability.
- improvement of overall organizational effectiveness and capabilities
- organizational and personal learning (Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence, 2009-2010, p. 51).

Both quality improvement and performance excellence are accomplished through Deming's 14 points for organization excellence and the Deming Cycle: Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) in which faculty would be integral in the action required in the 'Do' and 'Check' phases where a plan is implemented and performance measured. The Deming cycle is iterative in nature, and as quality improvement must be systemic all faculty must be involved to ensure success. Furthermore, the process should be consistently applied across the university and should last for an indefinite period. Engaged faculty and engaged students are both required for success of any such initiative.

Faculty Job Satisfaction

Faculty job satisfaction should be a concern for university administrators (Balzer, et al., 2000). The positive results of high levels of job satisfaction result in not only an increase in satisfied customers but also a more effective institution. Satisfied online faculty will lead to students who are satisfied with their experiences (Brown, 1996).

As specific duties for quality enhancement initiatives are asked of online faculty, critical points can be reached and dissatisfaction can occur (Corbin, 1998). While university administration cannot be expected to control personal intrinsic factors that may lead to job satisfaction, they can focus on the extrinsic facets of a position, "Any worker can attest that its [job satisfaction's] presence can be felt and its consequences observed" (Hagedorn, 2000,

p. 5). Faculty who are satisfied with their teaching assignments will be more likely to participate fully in quality enhancement initiatives and the resulting actions required in Deming's PDCA continuous improvement cycle.

Numerous researchers have documented a positive relationship between job satisfaction and compensation and fair treatment in the workplace (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997; Bobocel, Agar, Meyer & Irving; 1998; Dailey & Kirk, 1992; Leung, Smith, Wang, & Sun, 1996; Mossholder, Bennett & Martin, 1998; Sweeney & McFarlin, 1997; Van Den Bos, Wilke, Lind, & Vermunt, 1998). University administrators must carefully consider the satisfaction levels of online faculty as workers are satisfied with their positions "...to the extent to which their [faculty] jobs provide them with what they desire, and they perform effectively in them to the extent that effective performance leads to the attainment of what they desire" (Vroom, 1964, p. 264).

When quasi-administrative duties, directives regarding styles of communication or additional assessment requirements are added to the online faculty role because of quality improvement initiatives, faculty may see an inequity between their role in the online classroom and compensation received. Adams (1963) proposed the Equity Theory in which, "The central notion... [is] that we have a concept of what is just reward for our efforts (Gruneberg, 1979, p. 20). In Equity Theory, employees weigh their perceived input, efforts and contributions to the position against the perceived outcomes and rewards. "[E]mployees agree to make specific contributions to an organization for which they expect benefits in return that are proportional to their contributions" (Geurts, Schaufeli & Rutte, 1999, p. 254). University administration should ensure that faculty involved in a quality enhancement initiative understand their importance and perceive equity in the requirements of their role and what is received in return.

Methods to Enhance Faculty Satisfaction

Methods by which administration can encourage faculty satisfaction should be based upon meeting extrinsic needs, such as community, compensation and fair treatment. The effect of community on job satisfaction is supported by Corbin (1998), who found that the level of collaboration and community experienced by faculty influences the level of satisfaction. Careful consideration should also be given to remuneration, as salary has been, "found to be significantly related to...job satisfaction" (Terpstra & Honoree, 2004, p. 528). Moreover, it has been posited that when individuals are treated fairly, they have higher levels of job satisfaction (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001).

Setting up an online faculty community to provide opportunities for interaction with other faculty and with administration may result in a satisfied workforce as it leads to “a sense of shared purpose..., interaction among members... [and] establishment and enforcement of rules/policies regarding community behavior...” (Vesely, Bloom & Sherlock, 2007, para. 2). Such communities may be helpful when implementing a quality enhancement initiative as online faculty will not operate in isolation, but will be able to connect with, and find support from, fellow faculty (Schnitzer & Crosby, 2003). Online communities can be set up through list serves, social networking sites, or in a closed community set up on the university network. Building work relationships between colleagues and with administration through online communities can lead to increased levels of job satisfaction (Carnavale & Rios, 1995).

Satisfaction with pay includes all requirements involved in a position (Bowen, as cited in Bowen & Radhakrishna, 1981; Padilla-Velez, as cited in Castillo & Cano, 2004), and Terpstra and Honoree (2004) posit that the level of salary received by university faculty is significantly related to job satisfaction. When quality enhancement initiatives require adding additional requirements to the duties of online faculty, university administration may want to consider increased remuneration in the compensation paid per course taught. This is important, as it is relatively easy for online faculty who are not satisfied to leave a position, as in an online environment there are normally no close ties with co-workers, no contract, and a move of one’s household is not required.

Numerous researchers have documented the positive relationship between job satisfaction and fair treatment in the workplace (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997; Bobocel, Agar, Meyer & Irving; 1998; Dailey & Kirk, 1992; Leung, Smith, Wang, & Sun, 1996; Mossholder, Bennett & Martin, 1998; Sweeney & McFarlin, 1997; Van Den Bos, Wilke, Lind, & Vermunt, 1998). Carnavale and Rios (1995) posit that positive working relationships lead to increased levels of job satisfaction. The positive effect of fair treatment in the workplace on job satisfaction is also evident when faculty believe they can easily speak with an administrator (Marion & Quaglia, 1991), thus administration should make it a point to be available to online faculty. Research has also found that individuals who are treated fairly at work, experience higher levels of job satisfaction and are more committed to the organization (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001).

Conclusion

The culture of an organization influences how work is performed (Harris & Brannick, 1999). A culture of positive working relationships and working conditions may lead to increased levels of job satisfaction (Carnavale & Rios, 1995). It is critical that a university provide quality academic programs and utilize quality enhancement initiatives to ensure continuous improvement. However, initiatives that are directed at enhancing student engagement, require the buy-in of faculty as "... institutional goals mean very little to individual instructors who are being asked to apply familiar course content and pedagogical strategies in an unfamiliar environment" (Wiesenmayer, Kupczyrski, & Ice, 2008, para. 3).

Because most satisfied individuals work at the upper limits of their capacity, job satisfaction is beneficial for an organization. However, on the other end of the spectrum, Tack and Patitu (1992) posited that dissatisfied individuals work for their own gain to increase their level of satisfaction, which may not necessarily be of benefit to the organization. When the only link an online faculty member has with colleagues, students and university administration is through a computer connection, it is important to plan methods by which to ascertain and ensure satisfaction levels. "An organization has an important role in the collective satisfaction of its employees, and the role of promoting job satisfaction to ensure positive student outcomes is an important one for the leadership of an organization" (Satterlee, 2008, p.51). Faculty who are satisfied with their online teaching positions will be more likely to fully participate in continuous improvement initiatives.

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