

A DESCRIPTIVE PROFILE OF ONLINE FACULTY TRAINING PRACTICES IN THE ILLINOIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the existing training practices for online instructors in the Illinois community college system. As online learning continues to alter the educational landscape, online faculty need to be better prepared to support student success. A survey with questions based on best practices in online instructor training was distributed to the 48 community colleges and campuses in Illinois. The results of the study reveal that orientation and professional development programs are widely offered, yet only a limited number of programs and resources pertain to online pedagogy, teaching strategies, and assessment. There is also a lack of common standards for the format and content of professional training for online instructors. I discussed practical implications to improve professional training for online instructors and thus contribute to online student success.

Keywords: online instructors, professional training, community college, online training, online pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Online education continues to grow as a learning option for students and colleges. From 2004 to 2014, postsecondary education showed a 60% increase in online enrollment, with nearly 2 million students enrolled nationally in online courses at public, two-year institutions in 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014, 2019). The number of college students taking at least one online course has been increasing for 14 years and about a third of all postsecondary education enrollments were in online courses as of 2016 (Seaman et al., 2018). In the state of Illinois, 16.2% of all community college courses are offered online, and one in five community college students are enrolled in at least one online course (Illinois Community College Board [ICCB], 2019). Due to disruptions caused by the pandemic in 2020, the availability and quality of online education became a pressing priority for many colleges and universities (Garrett et al., 2020; Marcus, 2020).

As online learning continues to alter the postsecondary education landscape, new issues

confront instructors at community colleges. Teaching online requires different skills and competencies than teaching in face-to-face environments (Adnan et al., 2017). In order to best support student learning, retention, and degree completion, online instructors should be equipped with skills in course management, instruction, instructional design, and student engagement in the online setting (Bawa, 2016; Oomen-Early & Murphy, 2009; Yang & Cornelious, 2005). However, it is not clear how online instructors acquire these skills at their workplace, as many of them begin online teaching with little to no specific training (Vang et al., 2020). In the college setting, training for online instructors greatly varies by institution, and few states have implemented statewide guidance for providing professional training to support effective online teaching (Frass et al., 2017).

Despite the prevalence of online education and the emphasis on online course quality, limited studies have focused on the training practices to help college instructors teach online, especially for

the community college system at scale (Shea, 2007). In this study, I provide a descriptive profile of the existing training practices for online instruction for Illinois community colleges. Given the insufficient literature on professional development for online instructors (Herman, 2012), I distributed a survey to collect information with the aim of describing the current online faculty training practices in the community college system in Illinois. This study serves as one of the first comprehensive overviews of training practices in a large community college system by identifying common practices in online faculty training and potential challenges, and by offering suggestions for community colleges to improve quality of online faculty training to support online student success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because online instruction is different from face-to-face instruction, it requires specific institutional support for online faculty. Institutions that are fully engaged with support strategies for online courses are better prepared to provide postsecondary access with mature online programs and a variety of online offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2007). However, the responsibilities to provide student supports and quality online instruction often entirely fall on online instructors, and there is little oversight for online instructional quality (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Online faculty often receive little to no training on these aspects and the training that they receive is often based on traditional face-to-face classroom pedagogy (Ray, 2009; Vang et al., 2020). In fact, faculty commonly observed that there is a lack of institutional support for online instruction (Herman, 2012). In the community college sector, professional training for online instructors is complicated given their highly localized context and the large number of adjunct faculty (Brownell & Tanner, 2012; Elliott & Oliver, 2016; Wallin, 2007).

Technology as a Pedagogical Facilitator

Effective online course delivery requires more than simply repurposing or repackaging traditional course content (Fish & Wickersha, 2009). Instead, online instructors need to change their roles and responsibilities from a traditional lecturer to a facilitator of sharing information mediated by technology (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Online instructors are often required to use technology more effectively, adapt pedagogical knowledge into

a virtual environment, and use digital content and communication differently (Adnan et al., 2017). The intentional integration of technology and teaching can greatly benefit student learning. For colleges incorporating instructional design within a course, their online students perform better when compared to traditional face-to-face students (Garrett & Legon, 2019). Thus, professional training should support online instructors to both develop technology skills and learn about pedagogy and andragogy for effective teaching (Lane, 2013).

To develop a high-quality online class, instructors should be allowed enough time to develop and maintain course material, receive administrative support, and participate in training on technology-mediated teaching. In Kang's (2012) study, 65% of online instructors indicated that insufficient technical support was a major concern since most training programs were voluntary and contained little pedagogical content. In another survey, three quarters of faculty reported that they had received over 30 hours or more of technology-based training but only one third received training on pedagogy (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009). Largely because community colleges perceive this support as an unaffordable option, only about 35% of surveyed community colleges offered mandatory instructional design support to online instructors (Garrett & Legon, 2019).

Communication and Feedback Skills

In addition to technological support, quality training for online instructors should also include effective communication skills that greatly affect student success in the online setting, such as facilitating peer collaboration among students, encouraging active learning techniques, providing prompt feedback, and exploring diverse learning styles (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018). Regardless of class setting, student learning is improved when instruction is personalized and adapted to different learning styles (Murray & Pérez, 2015). Early research on online education found that course structure, communication, and course design heavily influenced student learning (Swan, 2003). In 2017, Adnan and colleagues reported that faculty competencies, including communication and interaction skills, are critical to online course design, engagement with students, and facilitation of deep learning. Online instructors often can more effectively support student learning and increase

student satisfaction rates if they are sufficiently trained to design courses, have access to instructional design and technical support, and provide proper feedback through assessment and communication (Adnan et al., 2017; Getzlaf et al., 2009).

Though timely feedback to students is important in both face-to-face and online courses, some types of informal feedback such as body language, conversations, and facial expressions are more difficult to convey in the online setting (Getzlaf et al., 2009). For asynchronistic online courses, student engagement and success can heavily depend on the instructor's virtual feedback and communication upon intentional design (Getzlaf et al., 2009). To be a successful online instructor, faculty need to have the skills to determine student learning preferences, be able to integrate technology tools, apply appropriate instructional techniques, and design courses (Quezada et al., 2020; Swan, 2003). In some circumstances, instructors should not only know how to use technology but also be able to help adult learners with technology (Kleisch et al., 2017). Different student expectations require online instructors to adopt different ways of communicating in online courses to clarify key concepts, identify learning goals, and participate in the learning community (Huss & Eastep, 2015).

Professional Training and Its Delivery Approach

Professional training methods for online instructors have changed very little since the early 2000s, and ways to improve instructional and technical training have been largely neglected (Lackey, 2011). Lackey's (2011) qualitative study revealed that online faculty preferred collaboration in training sessions and needed more assistance in technical and pedagogical skills. However, because of the lack of understanding at the administrative level in terms of the amount of time or resources required to effectively teach online, institutional resources allocated to training for online faculty have been limited. Zhen et al. (2008) surveyed faculty members to identify barriers that prohibited instructors from successfully teaching online and listed major concerns, including a lack of technological and institutional support, an absence of preparation time to develop online courses, a deficiency of standards in online courses, and a need for training to teach online.

In theory, structured training programs that systematically teach faculty to design, develop, and

deliver online classes are the most recommended form of training (Adnan et al., 2017). In practice, training activities for online faculty often take the form of workshops, one-on-one trainings, short sessions less than two hours in length, and one-time trainings (Meyer & Murrell, 2014). Since nearly a third of all faculty are engaged in some type of online education instruction in a typical year (Luongo, 2018), the demand for professional training often exceeds what a community college can supply. Some colleges prepare online instructors by providing specific courses and programs, while other colleges inadequately prepare instructors to teach online or even fail to provide any relevant training opportunities (Frass et al., 2017). Thus, more research is needed to understand the current practices of professional training for online instructors and how the effectiveness of these practices further influences student outcomes in the online setting.

METHODS

Given the limited research on current practices and the effectiveness of online faculty training, it is important to translate research to guide evidence-based decision making in improving online faculty instruction and developing training program standards (Diehl, 2016; Wolf, 2006). In order to identify existing practices in professional training for online faculty, I constructed survey questions for this study and distributed the survey to online education professionals within the 48 Illinois community colleges. Aiming to provide an accurate profile of existing professional training practices, I was guided by the following research question: How do Illinois community colleges provide professional training for online faculty?

In the state of Illinois, the 48 public two-year colleges and campuses range in size from 1,000 to 30,000 students. They are geographically located across from the Wisconsin border, within the city of Chicago, and in rural communities in the Midwest. In 2018, Illinois community colleges offered 21,508 online courses, which accounted for 16.2% of all courses offered (ICCB, 2019). During the past decade, the number of community college students has increased 45.6%. In 2018, about a third of all Illinois community college students enrolled in some or all online courses (ICCB, 2019). The participants of the study include chief online education administrators at each of the 48 community colleges in Illinois, based

on their job function with primary responsibilities to design and provide online education for faculty. These 48 individuals are knowledgeable about online programs, and they can provide the most accurate and informational response to the survey questions.

The survey was designed with closed-ended questions that centered around areas of training for online instructors, including orientation, technology skills, and instructional design support. The survey instrument was developed based on best practices for online instructor training from the literature review (e.g., Shea, 2007; Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Respondents answered questions based on current practices that are present in their own college, and all responses were anonymously recorded.

In November 2019, individuals identified as the chief online education administrators at each of the 48 Illinois community colleges were invited via email to complete the survey through Qualtrics within one month. A follow-up reminder email was sent to these 48 individuals two weeks later. The survey closed in December 2019 with responses from 22 out of the 48 colleges. While it is estimated that web-based survey returns are 11% lower than other survey modes (Saleh & Bista, 2017), the response rate of 46% for the current study was acceptable. Descriptive statistics and tables were created to depict a profile of existing professional training practices for online instructors in Illinois community colleges.

It is worth noting that the study is subject to several limitations. First, the findings can be largely driven by responding participants, so the findings cannot be generalized to all Illinois community colleges. Future studies can collect more detailed institutional characteristics and increase response rate to capture the potential variations of online faculty training among different colleges. Second, due to varying organizational structures at individual colleges, responses from participants can vary depending on their specific job responsibilities and roles in online faculty training. Future research can use qualitative approaches to include key stakeholders (e.g., faculty, executive administrators) and explore their personal interpretations and experiences in professional training for online instruction. Finally, given the scope of the current study, I did not directly examine the relationship between effective professional training, effective online instruction, and student success in the online setting. Future research can

focus on these topics and further provide practical implications for community college student success.

FINDINGS

Demographics

In the distributed survey, participants were asked to respond to a set of demographic questions. It was important to know the background and expertise levels of the survey participants to understand the functional area within individual colleges and the maturity and longevity of online training programs. As illustrated in Table 1, 58% of participants noted that training for online instructors had been offered at their institution for 11 to 16 years, with 26% offering programs for more than 17 years. Half of the respondents have been responsible for online training for over 11 years, with 20% for 5 to 10 years, and 30% for less than 5 years. Nearly two thirds of respondents listed their background as instructional design, followed by instructor/faculty (15%) and administration (15%). From the organizational structure perspective, 57% of respondents are

Table 1. Demographics of Survey Participants

Item	N	Percentage
Years online training has been offered at the institution		
None	0	0%
1-2 years	1	5%
5-10 years	2	11%
11-16 years	11	58%
17-20+ years	5	26%
Person responsible for online faculty training and development at the college's background/experience area		
Information Technology (IT)	1	5%
Instructor/Faculty	2	15%
Administration	3	15%
Instructional Design	13	65%
Years you have been responsible for online training at the institution		
0-5 Years	6	30%
5-10 years	4	20%
11-16 years	10	50%
17-20+ years	0	0%
Area of college your department is found organizationally		
Teaching and Learning Center	1	5%
Information Technology	12	57%
Separate Functional Area	3	14%
Other	5	24%

umbrellaed by the Information Technology (IT) department. These demographic results indicate that the respondents should have sufficient working knowledge and experience in online instruction training, while a high proportion of respondents have a technical background.

The Prevalent Use of Orientation for Online Instructor Training

As indicated in Table 2, we found that it is common for the Illinois community colleges to offer initial orientation for online faculty. Specifically, 95% of the responding colleges provided a general new-hire orientation for online instructors to provide them with information about institutional policies, services, and resources. Meanwhile, 80% of the respondents listed a separate orientation that specifically includes instructional training concepts for online faculty. However, the orientation was a one-time experience for 88% of the responding colleges. These orientation sessions tend to be mandatory for instructors (75%), and 94% of the colleges have adjunct faculty participating as well. With its various formats (i.e., 50% as face-to-face and 94% available online), faculty orientation seems to be an accessible and prevalent tool for Illinois community colleges to engage new and online instructors.

A critical finding regarding orientation for online instructors pertains to the contents covered by the

Table 2. Orientation for Online Instructors

Item	N	Yes
General new-hire orientation available that includes where to find policies, services, and resources at the college.	22	95%
Formal and specific orientation available for new online instructors that includes instructional training concepts. This orientation would be different than a new-hire orientation.	18	80%
Orientation as a one-time experience.	18	88%
Mandatory instructional orientation for instructors.	18	75%
Part-time instructor participation in instructor specific orientation.	18	94%
Face-to-face orientation.	18	50%
Orientation in an online format.	18	94%
Classroom management training included in the orientation.	18	38%
Information about pedagogy included in the orientation.	18	56%
Information about teaching strategies included in the orientation.	18	56%

orientation programs: The majority of responding colleges (62%) noted that no classroom management information was covered in faculty orientation, and only 56% said they offered information about pedagogy or teaching strategies. The findings seem to indicate that not all colleges use orientation as the venue for instructors to receive training for online teaching. Orientation may be considered a mechanism to strictly deliver new-hire information or specific to a subject area rather than providing training that can sustainably support online faculty in the long term.

Training Content for Online Instructors

In terms of training content for online

Table 3. Training Content for Online Instructors

Item	N	Percentage
Online technical support services provided to faculty	22	100%
Training to learn software changes or changes in delivery systems	22	100%
Strategies and instructional design components included in training	22	50%
Minimum instructional benchmarks/standards utilized during course design process	22	75%
Faculty design courses that they teach		
Never	7	35%
Rarely	0	0%
Sometimes	2	10%
Frequently	2	10%
Continuously	9	45%
Instructional designers available to help develop courses		
Never	2	10%
Rarely	1	5%
Sometimes	0	0%
Frequently	4	20%
Continuously	13	65%
Professional Training includes:		
Information about pedagogy	22	50%
Course pacing strategies	22	50%
Strategies for student feedback	22	85%
Strategies for student interaction	22	85%
Strategies on teaching effectiveness assessment	22	50%
Course review or course assessment	22	75%
Types of instructor assessments other than student evaluation in courses	22	70%

instructors, as presented in Table 3, all respondents agree that technical support services were provided to faculty for them to learn new systems or software, but only half the colleges include teaching strategies and instructional design components in training. It is critical to point out that 75% of respondents believe there is minimum instructional benchmarks or standards utilized in the course design process. Specifically, 55% indicated that individual faculty were either continuously (45%) or frequently (10%) designing the courses that they teach, though 85% of the responding colleges have instructional design support available for online instructors either continuously (65%) or frequently (20%). About three quarters of the responding colleges provide course review or course assessment, as well as some form of instructor assessment other than student evaluation. Given the lack of benchmarks for the course design process, the survey results do not reveal if there is a misalignment between the information and technical support provided and what online instructors actually need to effectively develop a course.

In the training provided to online instructors, 85% of the respondents indicated that training covered instructional components, such as strategies to provide feedback to students and to enhance student interaction. However, only half of the respondents listed training content about pedagogy, course pacing, and teaching effectiveness assessment.

Professional Development for Online Instructors

In terms of long-term professional development for online instructors (see Table 4), the survey results indicate that all colleges provide continuing professional development beyond the initial orientation. All survey participants except for one felt that college administration supported online instructor training. However, the intensity and format of trainings seem to vary, including one-time internal or formal professional development workshops (65%), formal or informal conference opportunities (80%), and development resources available on a website or through the course management system (45%). Table 4 also shows other common resources available to online faculty, such as self-directed teaching resources (95%); peer support or online community support (85%); quality review of completed courses by peers, an instructional designer, or a committee

(75%); and faculty assistance in transitioning traditional classroom course material to an online format (85%). However, only 30% of community college offer formal mentoring programs for online instructors, and fewer (22%) have a formal professional development center for online faculty on campus.

With respect to the content of professional development training, the majority of community colleges offer collaborative course design (85%) and training materials for faculty to learn about

Table 4. Professional Development for Online Instructors

Item	n	Percentage
Professional development offered more than initial training to teach	21	100%
Format of online instructor trainings delivered		
Workshop	7	35%
Traditional course	1	5%
Online	12	60%
College administration supports online faculty training	20	95%
To learn about best practices or standards		
Internal or formal professional development workshops (< 4 hours)	21	65%
Formal or informal conference opportunities	22	80%
Development resources available on website or through course management system	20	45%
Professional training resources		
Self-directed teaching resources available for faculty	21	95%
Peer support or online community support	20	85%
Formal mentoring program on campus	21	30%
Peer, instructional designer, or committee review of completed courses	22	75%
Faculty assistance in transitioning traditional classroom course material to an online format	22	85%
Formal professional development center for online faculty on campus	20	22%
Professional training content		
Collaborative course design training offered	22	85%
Training materials available to learn about online instruction	20	70%
Faculty choose to attend professional development based on subjects of interest	22	95%
Professional development experiences tailored or created for specific faculty or individual departments	22	55%

online instruction (70%). Almost all respondents (95%) indicated that these professional development opportunities allow faculty to enroll in development courses that interest them. However, only 55% of community colleges provide professional development experiences tailored or created for faculty in specific departments.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Preparing faculty to teach online is an important component for student success in online programs. However, 38% of community college administrators reported that student demand for online course offerings exceeds what is currently available (Lokken, 2015). To support effective online instruction, professional development programs need to be designed to meet the needs of online instructors (Vaill & Testori, 2012). Exploring how training is provided to online faculty, this study surveyed all 48 community colleges and campuses in the Illinois Community College System to understand their current practices. A few findings emerged from the survey results, including practices of orientation, professional training content, and extended professional development across the responding colleges. The survey results primarily indicate that while new-hire orientation and extended professional development are common strategies colleges use to provide training for online instructors, there is high variation in terms of training content relevancy, training program standards, and community building. These findings offer practical implications for community colleges to provide training for online instructors.

Ensure Content Relevancy in Professional Training

While online technical support and training about learning management systems are widely available, trainings on pedagogy, class assessment, and discipline-specific content are limited. This is consistent with Fish and Wickersha's (2009) finding that online instructors reported having more experiences with technology-based training than training on teaching strategies, pedagogy, or assessment. Prior research has indicated that it is essential for faculty to understand the relationship between pedagogy, course content, and technology in order to develop and instruct quality courses (Vaill & Testori, 2012).

More recent research has focused on how

instructors' social presence can increase online students' satisfaction and knowledge gain (Richardson et al., 2017; Song et al., 2019). For example, Thomas et al. (2017) compared text and video feedback in asynchronous classes and found that video feedback better contributed to the social presence of the instructor. Effective faculty-student interaction, communication, and peer engagement can effectively increase student satisfaction and reduce the drop-out rate for students in online programs (Gravel, 2012; Willgeng & Johnson, 2009). Community college online faculty must be present in selecting course resources, designing course structure, and promoting student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions to socially engage students (Gurley, 2018; Rios et al., 2018), and professional training content should cover this pivotal component. Further exploration of how communication strategies and student success are related is warranted in future research.

Additionally, the evaluation of teaching effectiveness seems to be largely overlooked in professional training for online instructors. In fact, professional training on technical support, student readiness, and instructor readiness to teach online are primary needs for online instructors to be successful (Oomen-Early & Murphy, 2009). While only about half of the responding colleges include training content on instructional design, it is not clear if there is any evaluation process of how an instructor accesses and efficiently utilizes these resources. The ability to convert professional training to quality course design and instruction requires evaluating student learning, student satisfaction, and faculty's use of technology. This project did not delve deeply into the area of student learning outcomes, yet appropriate approaches of online teaching effectiveness assessment should be communicated in professional training sessions (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018; Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2020).

Finally, throughout the survey, the responses indicated that there was very little, if any, specific professional training for specialized types of instructors or departments. Professional training about online instruction was more of a "one-size-fits-all" approach and it was delivered generically. As indicated by Cochran and Benuto (2016), training and support addressing best practices in specific subject areas are critical to online teaching. For example,

online instructors teaching foreign languages often face unique technology challenges, such as character writing in a foreign language (Sun, 2011). To promote effective faculty-student communication using foreign languages or mathematical symbols in the online setting, discipline specific training in both technology and pedagogy is warranted.

Establish a Formal and Scalable Online Instruction Community

If training practices are going to be developed or modified, it is critical that administrators support the changes. My findings suggest that general administration should support online instruction across colleges. As faculty's use of technology in online instruction is substantively impacted by institutional support, colleges should create a vision and plan for online learning that respects the value and experience for both students and faculty (Levy, 2003; Osika et al., 2009). These principles will guide implementation of multifaceted interventions to support online faculty's teaching effectiveness (Mohr & Shelton, 2017).

However, my study finds that informal mentoring was occurring, but formalized programs were rarely in place. Because online instructors indicated the need to gather with colleagues informally through online or face-to-face interactions, mentoring beyond the initial orientation was considered to be an effective method of informal professional training (Kidwell et al., 2004; Lackey, 2011). Thus, one possible approach to establish a formal and scalable online instruction community is through mentoring programs, which allow for more reflection, interaction, and an enhanced learning environment for online faculty (Meyer & Murrell, 2014; Vaill & Testori, 2012; Wolf, 2006). Based on the success of this approach of knowledge sharing, strategic efforts should be implemented to ensure that mentoring structures are introduced into the training processes for online instructors.

Identify Online Instruction Training Program Standards

While online programs flourish when a college provides financial, developmental, and other resources (Wolf, 2006), statewide or institutional standards for online instruction training programs should be identified, adopted, and systematically implemented to ensure the quality and consistency of online education. For example, comprehensive

online instructor training can start with the new-hire orientation. Though initial orientation programs may not holistically provide training on pedagogy, instructional design, and assessment of teaching effectiveness, they can provide an initial introduction to training practices, procedures, and the learning environment for online faculty.

Another way to revamp orientation programs is to enroll online instructors in an extended professional training program that includes topics on course design, pedagogy, technology skills, and teaching strategies (Frankel et al., 2020; Roman et al., 2010). Continued layers of professional training should be provided to help instructors build their skills over time, with scaffolding to ensure online instructors' ongoing development toward teaching effectiveness. Variations may be multiweek programs prior or during online teaching, online weekly tips, and access to teaching resources beyond the initial orientation (Meyer & Murrell, 2014). On a regular basis, colleges should seek feedback from online instructors and course designers to evaluate professional training content and update resources. Limited by its scope, the current study does not identify elements for a set of universal training program standards, and conversations need to occur in the Illinois system or at individual colleges, given their specific contexts of online education.

CONCLUSION

In sum, by collecting responses from chief online education administrators in Illinois community colleges, this study identified common practices of professional training for online faculty. Moving forward, community colleges should evaluate their online faculty training programs and (a) ensure content relevancy in course design, technology support, and discipline-specific pedagogy; (b) build a formal community to engage and support online instructors, and (c) adopt universal standards and ensure consistent quality of professional training for online instructors.

Because of the historical lack of understanding at the administrative level in terms of the time and resources required to effectively teach online, institutional resources allocated to training for online faculty have been limited (Lackey, 2011). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, colleges were forced to rely upon online instruction to ensure a safe learning environment (Dhawan, 2020). The

challenges related to the pandemic reaffirmed for faculty and administrators that the online instruction transformation process is more than switching platforms (Cochran & Benuto, 2016; O'Keefe et al., 2020). The existing variations in training practices, however, can adversely affect instructional quality and student learning (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). As community colleges aim to respond swiftly to all the unexpected changes, they should continue to scrutinize online education equity and institutional accountability to mitigate the pandemic-related negative effects on student success (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020; Hu, 2020). If the pandemic unintentionally catalyzes systematic changes in online education, this study serves as a starting point to collect initial information on the existing practices of professional training for online faculty in Illinois community colleges and contributes to improving online instructor training and supporting student success.

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