

Implementation of a Faculty Evaluation Model

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This paper presents an analysis of the development and implementation of a faculty evaluation model in the online campus of a midsized three-campus university. Faculty evaluation is an important practice, which can be utilized to improve student experience, ensure faculty awareness regarding expectations, and provide motivation to faculty through the provision of regular feedback. Further, data from the weighted evaluation which was designed as a part of this study can be utilized to inform administrative decisions regarding remediation and class assignments, contributing to increased fairness and an improved experience for faculty.

Keywords: faculty evaluation, professional development, classroom management, student feedback

INTRODUCTION

Faculty evaluation is an integral part of the professional development process, impacting faculty performance, satisfaction, and engagement. This study provides an evaluation of the development and implementation of a faculty evaluation model in the online campus of a midsized three-campus university.

Faculty evaluation is important for a number of reasons, key among which is that it contributes to faculty performance. This improved performance impacts the student experience. Particularly in online programs, student experience is directly impacted by the degree to which the faculty member is engaged in the process of teaching (Claywell, Wallace, Price, Reneau, & Carlson, 2016). In this regard, faculty must actively facilitate their courses, contributing on the discussion board and providing detailed and

helpful feedback to their students. Further, the faculty member must serve as the guide, directing students to maintain awareness of university functions, opportunities, and policies. The majority of faculty members wish to engage their students and yet faculty performance is not always consistent with this aim. Student end of term evaluations of faculty are one measure of faculty performance but do not provide an adequate assessment of the faculty member, given the low rates of student participation (Hornstein, 2017), bias (Chavez & Mitchell, 2019) and the many factors which contribute to student perceptions of class value and instructor quality (Gómez-Rey, Barbera, & Fernández-Navarro, 2016; Gómez-Rey, Fernández-Navarro, Barbera, & Carbonero-Ruz, 2018). Despite the findings of a multitude of research, student end of term evaluation forms are still utilized as an important measure of faculty performance at many institutions (Thomas, & Graham, 2017).

Faculty, particularly those teaching in the online format, may feel disconnected from the institutions which they serve for a variety of reasons, such as a lack of engagement opportunities for faculty, a high workload, dissatisfaction with pay, or an insecurity regarding future teaching assignments (Jolley, Cross, & Bryant, 2014). For these reasons, among others, faculty may not always perform at the expected level, despite their best intentions. Particularly in cases where little interaction takes place between the faculty and the administration of the department, performance may vary widely. Research demonstrates that setting clear performance expectations for faculty and then providing regular feedback, recognition, and rewards is an effective way to improve faculty performance (Tobin, 2004; Tobin, 2018). Faculty can be motivated through the provision of feedback in important ways.

One way that feedback motivates faculty is that it provides recognition for outstanding work. Faculty who feel recognized by the leadership of the institutions for which they teach are more likely to perform well on a regular basis (Theall, 2017). A second way that feedback motivates performance is that it contributes to a clearer understanding of expectations. Although expectations may be set during the hiring and training process, faculty may not have a clear understanding of how those expectations translate into the online classroom. As such, regular feedback is an effective way to increase clarity and understanding among faculty. A final benefit to faculty evaluation is that, when adequately quantified, the data obtained through faculty evaluations can be utilized to inform remediation and teaching assignments thereby contributing to increased fairness and justice within the department. The first step in developing system of faculty evaluation is to determine the key competencies for online faculty.

Faculty can directly impact the success of an online course by providing direction, engaging students, and providing feedback. These key factors which are impacted by faculty and contribute to the success of online courses can be categorized as direction-related competencies, engagement-related competencies (Bloomberg, & Grantham, 2018), and feedback-related competencies. First, in terms of direction, faculty should direct the online classroom by opening each class with an introduction. Further, each week should be opened with a summary, setting expectations for the students. Faculty should also set the tone for engagement within the online course room by utilizing technology, such as video, to provide a rich experience for their students. This then models technology use for the students.

In terms of engagement, discussion boards offer faculty the opportunity to demonstrate active engagement with course content. Faculty may utilize the discussion board in an online course to demonstrate responsiveness and value to their students. By responding to the main post of each student, the faculty member is empowering all students to share their thoughts. Further, the responses provided to each student should advance the discussion by posing questions, sharing practical experience, or sharing relevant research. As in the case of the use of technology, the faculty member is able to model engagement on the discussion board, demonstrating its importance to students. Feedback is another key strategy for improving the online course experience.

Through the provision of detailed, balanced, and helpful feedback, faculty are able to direct students to identify areas of opportunity in important ways. Further, faculty are able to provide praise where applicable, highlighting areas of excellence. Additionally, faculty are able to use the feedback process to inform students regarding next steps. In situations where students have performed at an outstanding level, faculty are able to pose ideas regarding future aspirations. Training faculty in the effective management of an online course starts with setting expectations and proceeds to teaching strategies for success.

Setting clear expectations is of the utmost importance when training online faculty. Particularly for faculty who teach for multiple institutions, expectations may not be clear. Providing expectations in the written format, for reference, and then explaining expectations in a virtual live meeting, allowing adequate time for feedback, questions, and reactions is an effective strategy for ensuring that expectations are understood by new faculty. For current faculty, periodic reminders regarding expectations may be provided, particularly in situations where expectations are not being met.

One effective strategy for reinforcing expectations is to teach strategies for success to faculty, which can be accomplished through the provision of regular professional development (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018). Professional development can be utilized as a way to provide a sense of community for faculty, particularly those that are geographically distributed (Adnan, 2018; Coswatte, & Mohr, 2017). Further, topics which emphasize the expectations for effective practice required by the institution are useful. For instance, in situations where a short turn-around time for feedback and grading is required, a professional development session which focuses on strategies for providing feedback in an efficient manner may be utilized. An added benefit to this strategy is that it encourages attendance during professional development sessions. Faculty will likely be motivated to attend sessions when the topics are directly aligned to aspects of their role within the institution.

There are a number of considerations for faculty evaluation, key among which include frequency. It is important to avoid administering evaluations at too short an interval. This leads to an excessive workload for the individuals tasked with completing the evaluations and may not add significant value in the form of data. On the other hand, long intervals between evaluations may contribute to reduced faculty motivation, given the infrequent feedback they are receiving. Decisions regarding frequency are typically made based on the availability of resources, as well as the length of the terms of the institution. If, for instance, terms are 4 weeks in duration, an evaluation every second term may not be necessary. On the other hand, an institution with 8-week terms may find that conducting evaluations every second term works well. A second consideration is structure of the evaluation.

While faculty teaching face-to-face courses are typically evaluated by a classroom observation, conducting an evaluation of an online course presents unique challenges. In an 8-week term, for instance, the average online course will have at least 16 activities which could be reviewed, an introduction, and eight weekly overview announcements. Utilizing a checklist allows for a consistent review. When utilizing checklists, it is important to ensure direct alignment with faculty expectations (Benton, & Young, 2018). The checklist can then be shared with faculty and utilized as a way to provide recognition for outstanding practice and to inform discussions regarding areas of opportunity where applicable. In this manner, the evaluation process contributes significantly to faculty growth (Channing, 2017). Checklists for faculty evaluation should also be vetted to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Given the large amount of instructor-generated information included in an online course, individual raters may focus on different aspects of the course. It is possible to clarify expectations for raters through check-list design, as well as training. An additional way to improve the reliability and validity of a checklist for evaluation purposes is to add weights to the categories. Categories of performance can be assigned an equal or an unequal weight, based on the relative value assigned to various components by administration. In recent years, technology has been utilized to target various components of online course facilitation in innovative ways.

Research by Askar (2019) outlines the benefits of target-based engagement assessment utilizing statistical modeling as a method of technology-enhanced faculty evaluation. Kumar & Jain (2018) demonstrated the use of a computer system to extract aspects of faculty feedback and assign numerical values based on contribution to the student experience. This study presents a faculty evaluation model which aims to categorize and quantify faculty performance on key components with relevance to the student experience: direction, engagement, and feedback.

METHODOLOGY

The Faculty Evaluation Model employed here involves evaluating each faculty member against a list of core competencies (Bloomberg, & Grantham, 2018). These core competencies are organized into faculty standards for effective practice, which are communicated to all faculty during their orientation period.

Categories

The Faculty Standards for Effective Practice are broken down into 3 categories: Administrative Management, Classroom Management, and Student Feedback.

Administrative Management

Administrative management entails the administrative aspects of the faculty role. For example, monitoring the university's announcements to ensure knowledge regarding current institutional policies is a competency included in this category. Additional competencies included in this category include engaging in programmatic activities, attending professional development session, and attending faculty meetings.

Classroom Management

The second category is classroom management. This category outlines best practices pertaining to the effective facilitation of online discussions. Faculty are expected to expand the scope of each discussion by providing engaging comments in response to the posts of the students. These comments may provide examples, pose questions, or reflect on experience. An additional aspect of this category is the review of required and supplemental resources prior to the start of each term. Finally, this category addresses requirements involving weekly introductions, which must be posted as announcements and are expected to outline the weekly objectives and assignments.

Feedback

The final category is student feedback. Faculty are expected to grade all course assessment activities within forty-eight (48) hours of the completion due date. In addition to providing grades, faculty must provide student feedback that recognizes and acknowledges excellence in student work, ensuring that grading rubrics and substantive narrative is given in the feedback to the student.

Evaluating Faculty

The faculty standards described above are aligned with an evaluation form, which is composed of 20 key criteria which represent effective practice. Faculty are assigned 0 to 2 points on each criterion. A score of 0 indicates that the criterion has not been met. A score of 1 indicates that the criterion has been partially met. A score of 2 indicates that the criterion has been fully met. Faculty must earn at least 80 percent of the total points to remain in good standing.

There are several data collection points that are obtained in order to properly evaluate each faculty member on the criteria outlined in the three categories described earlier in this paper. For example, in category A: Administrative management, one of the criteria is for faculty to attend a professional development activity once a month. Each term, the faculty development committee will typically host 2 professional development activities, 1 for each month. The faculty member's involvement in the professional development activity is tracked each month during the term. If faculty do not attend a professional development activity, or partially attend by only going to one professional development activity, then this is noted and tracked, and then used when evaluating faculty against the category of administrative management and its corresponding criteria.

Additionally, in category B: Classroom Management, and category C: Student Feedback, weekly observations are conducted and documented in the online classroom. The criteria used in collecting this information are based on the faculty standards previously outlined. For example, faculty engagement with

students on the discussion board, adherence to faculty standards in terms of grading assignments, and faculty response time to student inquires are all assessed on a weekly basis. The aforementioned observations are tracked so as to provide a fair and data-informed evaluation of each faculty member.

RESULTS

After following the procedures outlined above, evaluators are able to determine the degree to which each faculty member has adhered to the standards of effective practice employed by the organization. Preliminary results show that faculty members who are assessed regularly, tend to stay within an optimal range or improve over time. This method has also shown to be an effective training tool for newer faculty, and the process resembles that of a pinball machine. For example, faculty may start off great at the beginning of the year, leaving substantial feedback, answering emails from students in a timely manner, participating in discussions to engage students, and finding creative ways to help learners dive deeper into the content. As the year progresses, faculty may reduce their level of attention to discussions and leave less substantial feedback. Through the data-informed peer-feedback process described here, the evaluator is able to motivate consistent faculty performance by encouraging regular reflection on strengths and weakness as they pertain to the facilitation of online courses.

DISCUSSION

The faculty evaluation model employed here demonstrates multiple benefits, key among which is that it reduces subjectivity with respect to faculty review. Further, the regular interactions facilitated by the model serves to increase faculty engagement. This model has the potential to improve both the faculty and student experience in important ways.

Research demonstrates that setting clear performance expectations for faculty and then providing regular feedback, recognition, and rewards is an effective way to improve faculty performance (Tobin, 2004; Tobin, 2018). The value of peer to peer feedback, when informed by clearly outlined competencies was demonstrated by this study.

Limitations of our research included the lack of quantitative data. We also hope future research can incorporate data from the student experience. Student engagement is key to the success of any institution of higher education and its assessment will serve as an impactful future study. Student experience is directly impacted by the degree to which the faculty member is engaged in the process of teaching (Claywell, Wallace, Price, Reneau, & Carlson, 2016). Assessing the correlational between the student experience and faculty engagement would be another key study for future research.

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