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Building Trust:

How to Address Faculty Concerns about Online Education

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As enrollment growth in online courses continues to outpace overall higher education rates (10 times in 2011[1]) and as traditional schools continue to grab headlines with bold online initiatives, it seems the wide adoption of online and blended learning is here to stay. However, as this extraordinary transition in higher education progresses, it's necessary to consider how this change looks to those who are in the trenches delivering courses every day — the faculty.

Studies, like The Babson report Conflicted: Faculty and Online Education[2], offer a glimpse into how faculty and administrators view the general quality, implementation and outcomes of online learning and the results show a big disparity of opinions: the majority of faculty remain skeptical about online learning's quality in comparison to traditional classroom learning and 58% of faculty members are more fearful of online learning's ascent than they are excited. Compare this to administrators, 80% of whom are more enthusiastic than fearful and 75% of whom believe that learning outcomes in online programs are as least as good as their traditional counterparts.

As administrators recognize the benefits and push for increased online learning initiatives at their schools, it's necessary for them to fully understand, validate and address faculty concerns. In this playbook, we'll help school administrators better understand their faculty's top concerns with online learning and provide recommendations for how to address them and build a thriving, high-quality online initiative.

Why Are Faculty **So Fearful of Online?**

Although online learning has become an accepted practice over recent years, it comes as no surprise that faculty fear and resist making the transition to online teaching because they are stepping out of their comfort zone. For many, "online" evokes a mechanistic, standardized approach to learning that focuses on low-level cognitive skills rather than communication, critical thinking and creativity. For others, they worry about technology and learning new pedagogical techniques, or being overloaded with work and being insufficiently recognized or compensated for their efforts.

After 20 years working alongside faculty as they make the transition to online teaching, we believe the concerns they express are often well-founded and even emblematic of the early struggles universities went through in their online ventures. In our experience, while fear manifests itself in a wide variety of ways around several issues, concerns about three critical components of an online initiative drive the bulk of faculty resistance: **quality, support** and **incentives** (in the form of compensation and recognition).

With careful planning and action directed at these three areas, administrators can make the difference between building a thriving, high-quality online or blended initiative, and creating a flashpoint of resentment and ongoing conflict with poor outcomes on campus.

Read on to better understand your faculty's top concerns and learn ways to proactively address them for more satisfying and effective online experiences at your institution.

Quality

Along with the most common fears associated with online learning, the Babson survey also found that the majority of faculty members believe that online learning outcomes are inferior to those of traditional courses. Institutions offering courses online must assure effectiveness, not only to allay faculty concerns, but to validate the initiative's advancement of their mission and to establish the value of their degrees in the marketplace.

Only 25% of faculty members, however, believe their institution has the proper tools in place to assess the quality of online instruction, and less than half believe their institution has tools in place to assess traditional instruction. This highlights the

fact that while institutions are discussing the need for improvement and moving to develop stronger assessment practices, there is still a lack of evidence of learning outcomes in higher education.

One way for institutions to provide evidence of their commitment to quality would be to focus on generating authentic and transparent outcomes data irrespective of modality (face-to- face, blended or fully online). This would support the improvement of all instruction as well as provide clear information about the effectiveness of online classes. Many faculty members will likely hold on to their skepticism of new modalities until such data are produced and openly shared in their institution.

Another way institutions can demonstrate commitment to quality in online courses is through investigations into instructional variables beyond modality. Given the early research and the momentum behind online learning (especially in areas such as nursing and business), it's time to venture beyond the broad question of whether online is legitimate or if it can be as effective as traditional models. The more pressing question is which practices within that broad category are most effective at meeting which learning objectives? Research in this direction and efforts to circulate the research supports the evolution of online course design and online teaching.

Quality is driven by so many complex, interdependent factors and can't be distilled into a simple formula. "We make it our business to help schools navigate this complex landscape," says David Migliorese Vice President of Academic Services at Wiley Education Services.

Support

Planning for the complex cultural and operational shift that comes with moving to nontraditional online formats is challenging in many respects, perhaps especially with regard to course development and delivery. Typically, schools embarking on these initiatives invest liberally in technology, considerably less in training and technical support, and even less in instructional design support. It's not uncommon for dynamic campuses of hundreds of faculty and thousands of courses to have only a handful of instructional design and technology staff.
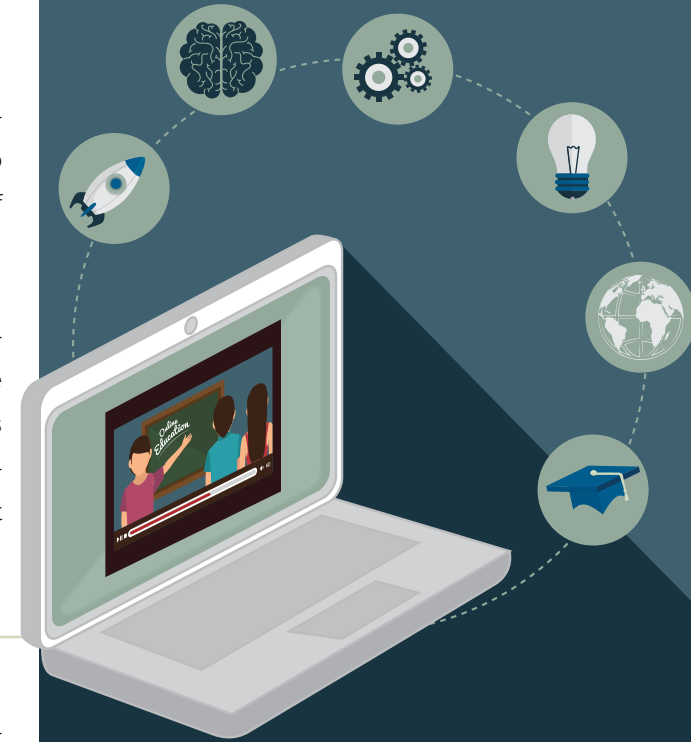
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This fosters a Do-It-Yourself approach to course development where faculty, armed with a few hours of LMS training, design and build their online courses the best way they know how. While some faculty members thrive under these conditions, they are challenging and uncomfortable for many others. And the quality that results is usually uneven and often uninspiring.

Faculty who are uncertain of the potential effectiveness of online courses create them with little support, **then look at what they created and deem it inferior to their traditional classes.**

As Diana Oblinger and Brian Hawkins explain in The Myth about Online Course Development[3] "developing and delivering effective online courses requires pedagogy and technology expertise possessed by few faculty." Reliably creating a truly distinctive, effective and engaging online course generally requires a team of people — faculty members, instructional designers, media specialists, technologists and support personnel.

Support for online course development is not just about the technology. It includes:

- *Carefully determining learning objectives and the activities that assess them.*

- *Planning engaging projects that require application of concepts in authentic contexts.*

- *Presenting information efficiently and clearly in various media.*

- *Fostering community and designing collaborative activity.*

- *Delivering effective and timely feedback to scaffold learners (without overwhelming instructors).*

- *Leading a community of learners as they explore new territory.*

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One important way for institutions to alleviate this concern is to provide a support system for faculty teaching online, which should include design support, technology support and facilitation support. Given these components, faculty fear associated with the prospect of teaching online can dissipate quite substantially. With these supports in place, narrow views of online learning can be replaced with an expansive vision of online learning's potential on many campuses.

A related cause of skepticism about online education is lack of direct experience with truly inspiring, state-of-the-art online courses. In a DIY course development environment, few faculty members have the time and inclination to learn the technology thoroughly, educate themselves on the pedagogy, explore all the various ways of designing their course content and activities, choose and implement a class collaboration strategy, take advantage of campus ID support, and create a great course.

Given that the affordances and limitations of the two modalities are so distinct, the same results can and should be achieved through very different means. When faculty "convert" their existing courses without truly redesigning for the new context, it can create a self-fulfilling prophecy: Faculty who are uncertain of the potential effectiveness of online courses create them with little support, then look at what they created and deem it inferior to their traditional classes.

Provide a Support System:
The Team Approach

Investing in a team approach that brings together instructional design, technical support and subject matter expertise in on key problems will help ensure that the most effective approach, rather than the most familiar, is chosen and adeptly implemented. The more this happens, the more momentum you can develop for online learning initiatives. If you have relied on a role-playing activity to teach a certain skill or concept in your traditional classroom, and you can't figure out how to redesign that activity for your online course, you are bound to remain skeptical of the potential of online learning. If, however, you've had the experience of collaborating with technologists and instructional designers who have been able to overcome pedagogical challenges like this one, then the picture starts to brighten.

Shifting to a team approach can at first be uncomfortable for faculty who are used to thinking of teaching as a solo performance. But courses that result from a team approach speak for themselves. Some of the most effective and engaging online courses include debates, team projects where students can co-author documents using live meeting spaces, video galleries and podcast galleries for peer review of student- submitted oral presentations and wikis where students develop class knowledge bases.

Incentives

Once fears about quality and support are addressed sufficiently and faculty are inclined to believe that an online learning initiative could, in fact, work from a pedagogical perspective, their concerns often turn to incentives: compensation and recognition. Some faculty worry whether "unbundling of the faculty role," as has been discussed for years, threatens to diminish the value of a traditional professor in the labor market, making it easy for schools to hire less expensive instructors to teach, while using content produced by its knowledge — creating traditional faculty. This fear of devaluation may be a key driver of the anxiety faculty feel about online learning.

Only 30% of the faculty surveyed by Babson believe their institution has a fair system of paying for online instruction, and just under half think their institution respects online teaching in tenure and promotion decisions. This, of course, is not a new phenomenon.

In a 2005 study of factors that motivate or don't motivate faculty to teach online, Peter Shea found that even among experienced online faculty, the top concerns about online instruction were inadequate compensation, inadequate time to develop courses and uncertainty about recognition of the effort[4].

Many schools taking the initial leap into online learning treat developing and teaching an online course as an amount of effort equivalent to teaching one section of a traditional course. After all, in conventional classroom courses, faculty are paid one lump sum for preparing materials, leading class sessions and grading student work — there is generally no separate pay for development.

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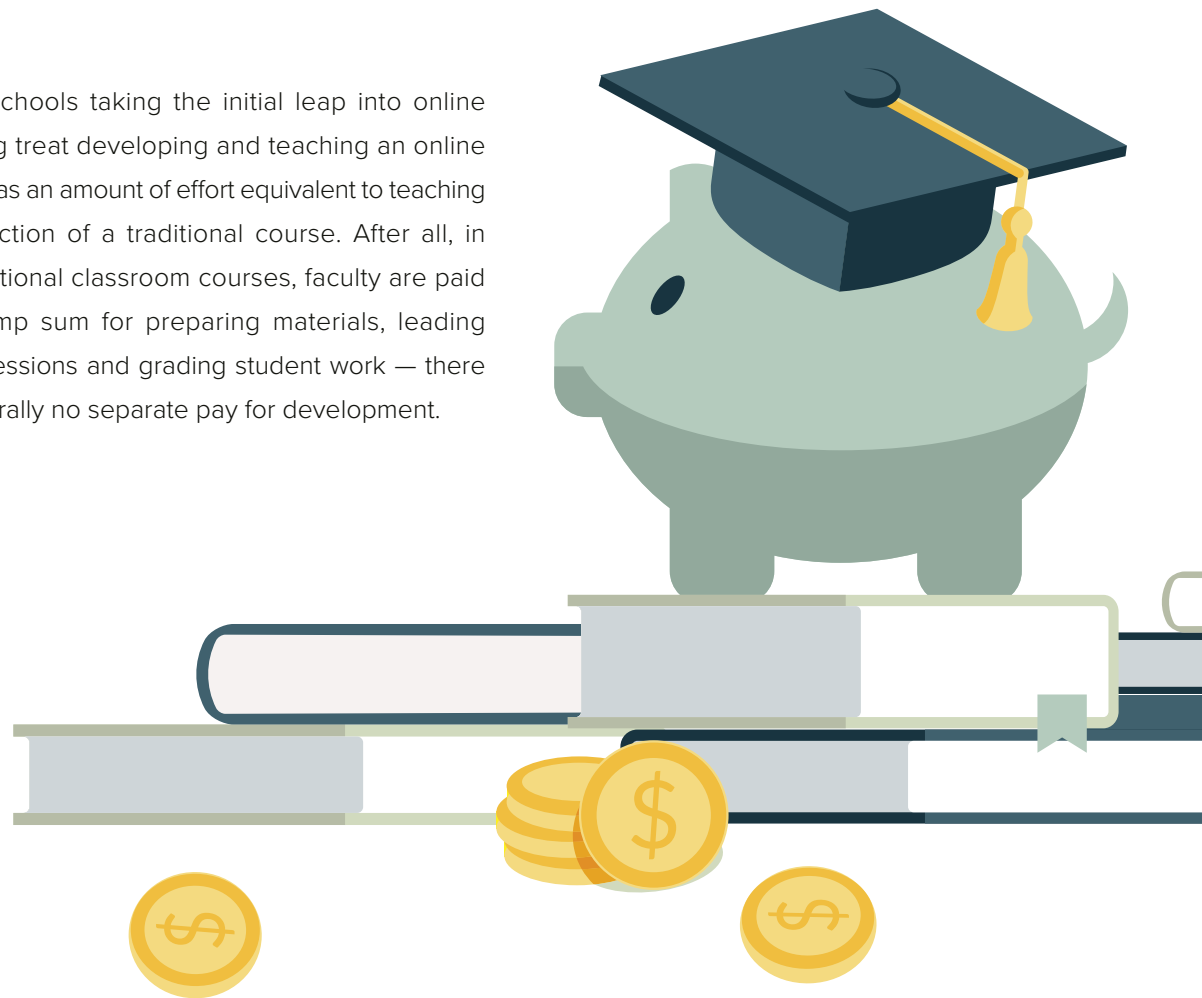
Course development and online instruction is itself a tremendous investment of time. It requires a deconstructing of learning events, reconstituting them to engage students at a distance and producing an often exhaustive amount of instructional material for students to make sense of the design.

Then there is media production, actually building out the web pages, figuring out the supporting technologies, testing and QA'ing the work.

Once developed, teaching the course is often an intensive effort in itself. In typical instructional models that do not include teaching assistants or community managers, faculty report spending up to 15 hours per week over an eight-week term teaching in discussion-intensive courses of 15-20 students. Schools that have been most successful at bringing faculty along in their online initiatives have been careful to ensure that compensation reflects the commitment online course development and teaching entails.

Alongside faculty concerns about compensation are concerns about recognition:

- *What will motivate faculty to put in the substantial effort to rethink their course and move it online?*

- *How will peers and leaders view their work?*

Too often, online initiatives are undertaken on the margins of the faculty without buy-in from its most influential members. This can be subversive to online initiatives, as the faculty community can devalue the initiative and relegate its participants to a second-tier status.

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Conclusion

The Babson study, like studies before and after it, shows that the more exposure faculty have to online learning, the more they believe in its legitimacy and potential. So in this sense, the principle challenge before administrators who want to advance online and blended learning initiatives is to entice those skeptics to give it a go, and then ensure that when they do it is a good experience in which they connect meaningfully with their students, and in which students reach meaningful learning outcomes.

They can do so through stronger, more authentic outcomes measurement across modalities, a robust support system for faculty who teach online, and compensation and recognition policies commensurate with the importance of the initiative.

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SOURCES

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